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“PERSUADING THE SECRET”: IN SEARCH OF MAINE’S HERMITS

by

Taylor Cunningham

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(English & Anthropology)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2016

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I have been working on this project for nearly three years now. The journey feels like a long one—with various roads, some yet to be traveled, detours, and dead ends. Largely, it has been a process of trial and error, as I learned to navigate the boundless, at times overwhelming, depths of research—within archives, old newspapers, photographs, poems, fiction, informal conversations and formal interviews—hoping to make some sense of what hermit characters mean to the state of Maine.

I found almost immediately that inconsistencies and gaps plagued—as I'm sure they do in any sort of oral history project—my attempts at concrete analysis. After quite a bit of research I still held what felt like a random collection of tales—some only half-told, others clearly fantastical, still more that couldn't seem to pin down a single place or date, or even find consensus on what the term, “hermit” actually means.

Moreover, as Dr. Edward (“Sandy”) Ives observed, “[the mythologist] is interested in the past not for its own sake but for how it lives in the human mind,” and finds expression in our daily decisions and actions.¹ This means that my job is to understand how these stories are carried in the minds of others, but for practical reasons of time and access (not to mention the porous nature of cultural boundaries), I cannot definitively claim an understanding of the “Maine” folk mind and its conception of hermits as folk characters. In short, the task of writing this thesis brought with it many obstacles, and I arrived at it unsure of how to go about writing honestly, in a way that

¹ Edward D. Ives, “The Poacher as Hero: the Graves Case as Exemplar,” *Forest & Conservation History* 35, no.1 (1991), 24.

expressed what I found and heard, rather than what perhaps I wanted such a collection of stories to be able to say.

In the opening pages of *George Magoon and the Down East Game Wars*, Sandy Ives addresses this all-too-familiar source of anxiety among social scientists. He asks of his own project, “To what extent was I creating the legend...by the very act of looking for it?”² Had Ives, over the course of several years of collecting material on an infamous Maine poacher created George Magoon, the folk hero, in his own image? Was this essentially, perhaps inescapably, a self-referential project?

This is a question that I’ve asked myself repeatedly while rooting around for hermit stories. Do I alone assign them significance? This is a particularly difficult question to address for two reasons. The first is that I have not found a comparative study that surveys hermit characters in a region and so there are no pre-prepared pathways here for me to work with. Secondly, the subject matter to some extent requires and inspires a great deal of self-reflection. In terms of traditional interactions between hermits and hermit-seekers, any sort of pilgrimage to reach the hermit is simultaneously (and possibly fundamentally), a journey into the interior depths of the self. So, while looking outward, past my own experience, I find myself continually turning inward.

I therefore have chosen to highlight two landscapes, which I believe, are neither clearly distinct nor independent of one another. The first, represented by nonfiction pieces, is an identifiably real space of concrete detail (though, of course by “real” I do not mean objectively true). This is where my actual experiences and findings, along with critical analysis of those materials takes place. The other is an imaginary realm—the

² Edward D. Ives, *George Magoon and the Down East Game Wars* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 8.

activity of my own mind as well as what I could glean from the collective folk mind. This parallel landscape is represented by a fictive story world that sits between and (marginally) within the nonfiction pieces. By placing nonfiction and fictional work side-by-side, I aim to make explicit the ways in which these realms are continually interacting and co-creating one another.

The marginalia, which includes real story material from my research yet places that material within fictional frames, works to accomplish a similar goal. I found seemingly endless permutations of the hermit character in Maine over the course of my research, but was analytically drawn to patterns and taxonomies, and so found it necessary to give those various examples some sense of order, imposed limits and distinctions, from which I could begin to locate continuity and meaning. However, I chose to put many of those hermit groupings in the margins of the main text and in overtly fictive spaces—made-up books and chapter titles—which are altogether arbitrary except in my own mind. This textual marginalia is placed intentionally in spaces along the main text—amending and challenging it—in order to offer further complexity and dimension.

I see the marginal text boxes throughout much of the thesis acting as characters with voices and competing narratives of their own. This attempts to mimic what I think of as the active borderlands of any writing project, and particularly this one, filled as it is with so many individual storytellers and idiosyncrasies. I hope that this chosen form offers an enhanced experience of the content. Creative play and even humor, I think, is important in a project such as this and I certainly had quite a bit of fun designing it.

The hike in is not easy. There is no discernible path—only traces of deer trails that wind senselessly around the bodies of trees. Though maybe I only imagine them as trails. I'm not entirely sure what defines a trail here. Can a place be drawn this vividly with such vague lines?

I admit that I'm used to prepared ground; all paved and logical. Ground that has direction. But they don't make maps for this kind of thing. Where I'm heading isn't the kind of place suited to measured grid lines.

I am certain only that I am lost and taking care with each step. That one foot follows the other, threading intricately around roots and rocks, and that hopefully this movement is enough. That soon I will arrive at the hermit's door, knock on its coarse wood, and gain entrance to the mind of a legend.

1. EDEN & RUIN: MONHEGAN'S ISLAND SHEPHERD

There
the hermit's house is: no door, windows like wounds,
a ribcage in a hat whose brim is eaves.

--Daniel G. Hoffman, "The Hermit of Cape Rosier"

Over another rise of ground, below him, he saw a sort
of sprawling house. It was not really a *proper* house—the
boards went higgledy-piggledy in all directions—but it did
seem to belong just where it was.

--Yolla Niclas, "The Island Shepherd"

And there was morning.

A thin strand of saffron separates the sea from the sky. A vault of crimson—or is it purple, now blue with an orange foundation—rises from the glittering Atlantic.

The right shoulder of Manana Island blushes pink, warming in anticipation. There's a spark somewhere, a chemical reaction or divine stimulus, and the length of the half-mile long island is suddenly afire, finding form in light. The fog lifts and its particles scatter—light atoms separate from dark atoms and each fall into their proper crevices and corners, creasing Manana's rocky mass. The island emerges from gray obscurity, a rigid boulder with hard contours and coarse ledges bordered by the shifting seawater, continually filling, brimming, and folding over itself.

Black cardstock paper silhouettes set against the warm morning hues—a misshapen shack, a flock of beasts, and a human form trailing after them—give some dimension and movement to the landscape. The human cut-out is a man with a beard and cap, a thin stream of smoke rising from his pipe. He moves slowly across the earth, unsteadily perhaps, but not uneasily. He knows every rock and shrub. Every trail is his. This is his island. Those are his sheep. One is named Eva and he loves her best. And that shack over there, at the eastern edge, is his home.

The shack is a collage of weather-beaten boards in various stages of sodden decay. They sit, balancing precariously on thin limbs of rock. The structure's makeshift architecture gives the appearance of so little intention that it might not have been man-made at all. It looks as though the elements had gathered here of their own accord, discarded from their original tasks but finding some communal use in a chance organic

arrangement. Indeed, it is said that this dwelling was made of driftwood—old crates and pieces of boats gathered from the shore or repurposed from the shepherd’s own vessel that he traveled in years ago when he first came to the island.

There is hidden logic, however, among the six or seven rooms piled on one another that sit, crouching between the rocks. Lobster cages rest on the shack’s side, stacked like vintage TVs in an electronic store window. There is also the suggestion of stairs and perhaps a porch leading up to an ill-fitted door and two rectangular gaps that could be mistaken for windows, above which hang old, fading buoys, scratched and discolored by salt and sea.

*Inside is a maze of dwelling—the result of years of additions with no conceptual whole—each room arbitrarily abutting the next. In one room there is a hard bed with messy blankets, in the next, a mountain of boxes with mysterious contents, to the right a corridor piled with rusting tools and in another room, canisters of tobacco, an old arm chair, canned food, and a portable transistor radio. On the wall there is a calendar marking the current year and shelves stocked with paperbacks—a mix of popular thrillers and spiritual guidebooks. Among them, Joseph Benner’s *The Impersonal Life*, puts our shepherd in the same book club as Elvis Presley and Michael Crichton’s 1974 novel, *The Terminal Man*, indicates some scientific interest on which most wouldn’t imagine such an archaic man to dwell.*

And some say that if you cup your hands over your eyes and squint through the shepherd’s windows you can see notes scribbled on the inner walls of the shack as well. What they contain, whether it is mundane or miraculous, is known only to the man—whose fluency in alternative sign systems forms a greater part of his legend. For he is

fluent in sheep. He baas when he laughs, when he forgets a word, or when he loses interest in human conversation.

The man speaks easily with his sheep, because they are his community. He spends his days tending to them, guiding them away from the edges of the islet and, when necessary, retrieving those that get trapped on the ledges. And in the shepherd's home you will find that sheep droppings litter the floor in every room. There are no designated human spaces and animal spaces on the island. The shepherd and his sheep move among one another as categorically similar beings.

A Polyphemus analogy may be tempting, but the man, who is surprisingly photogenic in that rugged sort of way, is not so wild as you might have imagined him. He is friendly, too. Cameras capture two eyes that twinkle, a gray scraggly beard, windblown and weathered, a knit cap, and an easy smile. In headlines they refer to him as Ray Phillips—the Hermit of Manana Island. The keeper of the isle, of an older way of being, of some seaside New England spirit, half-forgotten and only felt in the distant ringing of a ship's brass bell as it approaches the harbor.

And there was evening

With the daytime flames subdued, the island is a mass of dying embers. Above, the clouds coalesce into a pallet of oranges and purples and pinks and then separate and thin into large bands of color as they settle into the waves, which are now dark and soft. Ray turns homeward. The sheep, except for one who walks by his side, beat him to the door, nudging it open. He picks his way calmly across the earth. This is his island. Those are

his sheep. And that shack to which he turns, at the eastern edge, where the light has already gone, with its single kerosene flame in the window, is his home.

The first day.

The Trouble with Horizons

Understanding a local celebrity like Ray Phillips is a daunting task. After a considerable amount of time investigating his story and writing about it, I still feel myself working clumsily with the details of his life. Central to my uneasiness is an ever-present, irksome sense of insurmountable distance. Ray's daily horizon must have been very different from my own.

Hermit in the Spotlight: The Solitary Man Made Spectacle (2016)

1: "Hermits and their Seekers"

There is a long tradition of hermit-seekers in Maine. They take various forms—opportunistic journalists, curious academics, disillusioned citizens, and those rootless, melancholic souls after something they call Meaning. Some are even all these things at once.

They usually come from away—places outside of Maine. It doesn't really matter how far away, for once you're past the border the mileage is inconsequential, you are simply *away*.

The seekers stay for a time period that suits them. However long it takes to find the place, procure the invitation to enter and gain the hermit's confidence. Usually this is also about the amount of time it takes to realize how wild, and sometimes unpleasant, the woods—and admittedly, the hermits themselves, can be.

There's no knowing this for certain, because you won't find even a hint of it in any account, and likely the seekers can barely admit it to themselves, but privately we wonder if they're all thinking it: *Just get the story, and get the heck out of there.*

³ "Haven for Hermits," *Downeast Magazine*, June 2013.

I approach Ray Phillips far removed from the time and place of his circumstances. I was born nearly forty years after he died. I have lived in Maine for four years, spent probably two cumulative weeks on its coastal islands, and less than twenty-four hours on Monhegan Island, while Ray spent nearly half a century living across Monhegan's harbor on an isle of his own. I did not hear Ray's story firsthand, but sought it out in a June 2013 *Downeast Magazine* article on "The North Pond Hermit," where he appeared on a short list of historical hermits in Maine.³ I have spoken to only a handful of Monhegan residents on the matter of his life and possess one hour-long recording of a conversation with a man, now living in Brunswick, who visited the

hermit as a child and was the subject of Yolla Niclas's 1959 children's book, *The Island Shepherd*.⁴ The rest is all textual fragments that, at times, provide contradictory information.

Furthermore, Ray's own lifestyle complicates even his generational context. He appears to have been living in a time period unto himself—an odd sort of amalgamation of near-and-distant past and present that is incongruent with the actual time in which he lived. There are several historical traditions within his persona. He is depicted as at once a biblical shepherd, a Homeric relic of some seaward odyssey, an 18th century pioneer, an old fisherman with clever yarns, and a modern American consumer of canned pineapple and fortune cookies.

There is also the problem of focal length. How near or distant from the day-to-day physicality of Ray's life is my lens adjusted to capture? Am I working with the idealized hermit, dwelling in an Edenic landscape around which newspapers have “spun fantasies,” and to which people are drawn from all over the country?⁵ Or am I looking at the hermit's habitat up close—mired in material ruin and personal inconsistencies, which complicate, if not collapse, the hermit's legend into fragments and ambiguity? Neither alone can address the complexity and significance of an individual who was both a private soul and public hermit.

I therefore attempt to draw Ray's image—the legend and the human—through several mediums—old newspaper articles, books, photographs, conversations and necessarily, my own matrix of associations and memories, which even before I've

⁴ Yolla Niclas, *The Island Shepherd* (New York: Viking Press, 1959).

⁵ Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's house in Paradise: the idea of the primitive hut in architectural history* (Greenwich: Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 13.

digested the details of this man's life, begin to fill out that image with archetypal tropes and expectations for aged solitary characters. Sitting here, socially, geographically, temporally "from away" I draw together a mix of hearsay and supposed fact to sketch out some semblance of a living, feeling individual with a legacy in current memory. In short, I am apprehensive about making assertions. I prefer to call my findings what they are, and have been, for any hermit-seeker—speculations.

Somewhere Between Near and Far: The Life of Ray Phillips

Ray Phillips, the Hermit of Manana Island, lived on an islet off the coast of Monhegan from 1930, when he left New York in a sloop for Maine's southern coast, until his death in 1974. There is some speculation about what brought him to the island, because it was this part of his life that remained hidden. Some say he had once worked in the meatpacking industry in New York City, had gotten tired of the "plasticity of it all" and decided to take leave of modern civilization.⁶ Some newspapers even quote him saying that he disliked politics and disapproved of the course society was taking. One newspaper article called him a "Depression Dropout."⁷ Others say he was "unsuccessful in love" and so "took to the sea."⁸ Maybe his brief part in WWI had something to do with it. Whatever the reason, Ray came to live on Manana Island and built a driftwood shack for himself. There he tended sheep, would fish and lobster to suit his needs and lived on a small veteran's pension and social security checks. He had no electricity or running

⁶ Marguerite Del Giudice, "He lives his way—alone on a Maine isle," *Boston Globe*, Feb. 2, 1975.

⁷ Phyllis Austin, "Depression Dropout Going Strong at 76," *Evening Star* (Washington D.C.), May 25, 1973) A-3.

⁸ Del Giudice, "He lives his way."

water, and likely ate a lot of canned food, as there was no evidence of a garden near his shack. His sheep and a goose by the name of Donald reportedly kept him company in his isolated home. Their constant presence was said to have given him a distinct odor.

Though he was new to the island, Ray was not new to Maine. He grew up in Newport, and attended the University of Maine where he was said to have studied horticulture. In 1918 he was drafted into WWI and, following his short time in the army, moved to New York City where he was either a grocer, fisherman, food inspector, or stock broker. He'd heard the fishing was good off the coast of Monhegan so he set sail for the island with the intention of leaving "the New York traffic and dirt."⁹ He did not settle on Monhegan, however, but instead took up residence on Manana—a tiny islet just across the harbor. He owned one-sixth of the island but was its sole inhabitant.

Although there was effectively a moat between Manana and Monhegan, making his dwelling somewhat physically remote, Ray's shack was clearly visible from Monhegan Island as was Monhegan Island from his shack. While his position allowed him to observe the goings on in Monhegan from an outside perspective, making him to some a guardian of sorts, people in town always had Ray on their periphery—his shack and figure an anachronistic, yet comforting presence. Ray was part of the landscape—the Hermit of Manana Island—claimed by the people who saw him as part of the natural outline of an otherwise bare islet.

But his visibility was not uninvited. Ray was a social man. He liked talking to residents and often went to Monhegan to get supplies and talk to his fellow islanders. He was also very accommodating to the many journalists and tourists who made the trip to

⁹ Robert Uzzell, "Hermit of Manana Island, Likes His Way of Life," *Maine Coast Fisherman*, Oct. 1954, 10.

Manana to ask him questions about his alternative 19th century lifestyle and sneak a peek inside his peculiar home. In the 1950's photographer Yolla Niclas came to the island and photographed Ray with a local boy, David Boynton, who used to ferry tourists over to visit the hermit on Manana. The resulting images were published in 1959 in a children's book called *The Island Shepherd*.

Some visitors would also write Ray letters seeking advice and he is said to have always responded to their inquiries in a friendly manner. Many liked to paint Ray as a philosopher of sorts. Journalists drew comparisons between his lifestyle and that of Thoreau's while highlighting an extensive collection of canonical literature in his home and reporting that he took notes on the walls of his shack. This is an area of dispute, possibly hyperbole, and where those who knew him say the real man confronts the legend.¹⁰ Ray, however, never solicited attention, nor acted any differently because of it. He is described as regarding his publicity as curious and amusing.

As both a legendary figure and flesh-and-blood man, Ray was well liked by the people on Monhegan, although some thought his lack of ambition was a sign of laziness. But as the decades passed, Ray reportedly grew more removed from the residents. As Monhegan acquired modern conveniences—electricity chief among them—Ray grew increasingly attached to his sheep. He often made “baaing” sounds in his speech to a degree of unintelligibility. He thought once of bringing a woman to Manana Island, but felt he had not the money or “skill” for marriage and as the years passed he stayed on his island more and more often.

¹⁰ David Boynton, in-person interview, August 20, 2015.

One winter day Ray was paddling across to Monhegan when his hands froze to the oars and he became very ill. People in town discussed convincing him to move onto the main island where he could be looked after, but Ray preferred to live out his days on Manana. He told the concerned residents that he would light his kerosene lamp each night to signal that he was okay. One night the kerosene lamp went unlit. Ray died of a heart attack on May 8th, 1974 at 83 years of age.

From Far Away: The Island Shepherd in Eden

David Boynton describes Monhegan during Ray's lifetime as "rhythmically different" from the mainland.¹¹ Set apart from the faster-paced, mobile networks of transportation and communication in southern Maine, Monhegan's tempo has historically been a slower one. When Maine's mid-century tourism advertised motoring vacations around the state¹² for example, Monhegan offered a more traditionally "rustic" tourist experience, like that "of a century or so ago," characterized by simplicity, moderate consumption, and a beautifully preserved, remarkably diverse landscape for recreational activity.¹³

Though Monhegan today has the same modern conveniences—electricity, plumbing, internet, etc.—as the mainland it still maintains a sense of its past. The environment is carefully managed. Three quarters of its surface is covered in trees. It has headlands, rolling pasture, a freshwater pond and rocky coves—essentially, "almost all the natural landscapes of mid-coast Maine" are compressed in its one-and-a-half-mile length.¹⁴ There are pelagic and passerine birds, raptors, waterfowl, puffins, gulls and terns. Blueberries, conifers, and lupine grow here beside small cottages and old captain's homes. The place seems to evoke New England of a century passed—the last vestiges of a slower, easier, better time—and is adorned in the summers with painters capturing it all on their easels. The whole scene is straight out of a Barbara Cooney children's book or a

¹¹ Interview August 20, 2015

¹² Stephen Hornsby, Richard Judd, Michael Herman, and Kimberly Sebold, *Historical Atlas of Maine* (Orono: University of Maine Press), Plates 71-2.

¹³ Ted Bernard, "Into the Eighth Generation: *Monhegan Island Maine*," in *Hope and Hard Times: Communities, Collaboration and Sustainability*, Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2010, 2010: 72

¹⁴ Bernard, *Hope and Hard Times*, 67

Sarah Orne Jewett short story. It's not quite paradise, but it appears—though perhaps consciously—pretty darn close.

Hermit in the Spotlight: The Solitary Man Made Spectacle

2: "Famously Photogenic"

It seems somewhat contradictory for hermits to be the subjects of so many professional photographs, but, the reality is, they are.

Photographers come from all over to capture these less-documented marginal characters (though, of course, they are documented disproportionately more often than the common man or woman of society, as a result).

Maybe it's their visually rich circumstances or a twinkle somewhere in the vicinity of the iris, half-hidden under a rugged, gray brow, or just a charming, old world cantankerousness they wear along with bear skins and a rifle, but photographers come from miles around for a snapshot.*

*See: William Lyman Underwood of Belmont, Massachusetts and his collection: "Hermits of Great Spruce," a series of photographs of three hermits living on Great Spruce Island in the early 1900's. Also, Toney Harbert's 1998 art exhibit: "Elmer Walker: Hermit to Hero," which documents an elderly man in Porter, ME and his special relationship to the local community.

Ray Phillips, who was photographed often in this landscape, demonstrates an atavistic lifestyle on what is already, as Mark Warner deems it, a "fabled island."¹⁵ The coupling is ready-made for a timeless tale.¹⁶ Ray, with his photogenic features—a reportedly "very attractive man" with "nice eyes"¹⁷—knit cap, billowing beard, flock of sheep, and lonely island hut, gives way almost instinctively to idealism and legend. Some primordial penchant for storytelling takes over and roots the man in deep time. His story seems to develop naturally out of our own storytelling traditions, often with little help from the "facts."¹⁸

¹⁵ Mark Warner, *Monhegan: a guide to Maine's fabled island* (Camden: Down East Books, 2008).

¹⁶ In a response to a "Letter to the Editor," concerning a *Times* article he wrote on Monhegan Island in 1972, journalist Jason Mark describes "Monhegan and her sister island" as, "steeped in primeval wonder." (Harriet Kline, "Fond Memories of Utopia," *New York Times*, Jun. 4, 1972.)

¹⁷ *The Hermit of Manana*, directed by Elisabeth B. Harris (2006; Maine International Film Festival.), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFWqx_g4PLs.

¹⁸ In a response to a discussion board on Ray Phillips, a descendant of Ray's writes: "I find it odd how rumors start and after a time seem to be passed on as truth or perhaps myth or one might even say romanticized history...you mention the Manana Island hermit and this is where, perhaps through mis-information or rumor or perhaps history retold too many times, you break off into fiction." Suffice it to say the author of this letter

Hermit in the Spotlight: The Solitary Man Made Spectacle

3: “Professionally Eccentric”

Joseph Knowles—aka Naked Joe— and his two-month stint in the Maine woods with nothing but a jock strap is still today, a century later, the stuff of speculation and legend.

A 2013 article in *Boston Magazine*, commemorating the hundred-year anniversary of Knowles’ feat in the woods, frames the public’s interest in the “modern day Adam,” and it’s supposed scientific value, this way: “Could modern man, in all his softness, regain the hardihood of his primitive forebears? Could he still rub two sticks together to make fire? Could he spear fish in secluded lakes and kill game with his bare hands?”

Unfortunately, based on Knowles’ experiment, the public never did find out for certain. The whole thing was likely a hoax to sell newspapers—and a pretty good one at that.

Naked Joe, for his part, spent the bulk of his time in the woods eating pie and drinking beer in a nearby cabin, sending notes written on birch bark back to “civilization” every few days.

But still, at the time, Joe got quite a lot of attention from the ordeal, and so could be found on vaudeville circuits, dressed in bearskin, rubbing to sticks together, teaching crowds a little about what that “hardihood” might have looked like.

Paradise of course is an imaginary landscape—the ideal first landscape, fitted to the needs of the human being—

a story of a distant memory of a dream. Joseph

Rykwert, in his study of the architectural manifestations of Adam’s implied hut in Paradise, puts it this way:

“All of these [architects] have spun fantasies around the framework of the lost plan, since paradise must, as

Proust sharply observed, necessarily be a lost one.”¹⁹

These spun fantasies, he argues, are evidence of a

persistent vision haunting two horizons—one is of a

distant past in which we were permanently barred from

Paradise and the other is of a future in which we

imagine ourselves to have regained what was lost.

Keeping the memory of origins alive is essential to that

ideal future. Rykwert thus echoes architectural

philosopher Marc-Antoin Laugier’s declaration, “Let us

never...lose sight of our little hut.”²⁰ It is unsurprising

national character is historically exemplified in the

architecture of small cottages and hermitages.²¹ Such

was not happy about Ray’s depiction as a former stock-broker who “snapped” and left the world for an idyllic life apart on an island (“Discussion on Ray Phillips,” *Briegull.com*, 2001, http://briegull.com/Monhegan/ray_phillips_discussion.htm).

¹⁹ Rykwert, “On Adam’s House,” 13.

²⁰ Ibid, 44.

²¹ Thoreau’s log cabin at Walden Pond, or Lincoln’s log cabin, for instance.

huts are representations of an original form and so perform as mementos of the origin story, reminding us to always keep it “in sight.”²²

Ray’s “rambling shack,” as David Boynton refers to it, seems to function as a primitive hut very literally kept in sight. From Monhegan, Ray’s dwelling, just across the harbor on Manana, once stood in clear view. David described the sight of Ray’s home as a “comforting” presence and staple in the periphery of their daily lives on Monhegan.

Significantly, its “rambling” arrangement looked more like a natural outgrowth of its landscape than an architectural feature. Yolla Niclas described it this way in *The Island Shepherd*: “It was not really a *proper* house—the boards went higgledy-piggledy in all directions—but it did seem to belong just where it was.”²³ The hermit’s home was not “proper” in the traditional sense of a human dwelling, but seemed to “belong” to its environment out of some natural identification with it. Its form mimicked the rugged outline of Manana Island, and so perhaps there was a natural, and not a human, logic to it. Possibly, we might easily assume, it was the product “of uncorrupted reason and instinct,” which Rykwert argues was characteristic of impressions of the Edenic “lost plan.”

Today, Boynton says, “it’s still a little odd” for him to look at Manana and not see the hermit’s hut. About a decade ago, Ray’s hut was burned down by a resident who felt that it was a “hazard” and a “liability,” with all the summer tourists poking around it.²⁴ Just above where the shack used to stand there’s a new, “somewhat unusual” building, concerning which Boynton says, “that kind of jumps out at me still, that’s wrong. It

²² Rykwert, “On Adam’s House,” 31.

²³ Niclas, *The Island Shepherd*, 26.

²⁴ Interview, August 20, 2015.

should be the hermit's dwelling." Boynton's comment suggests that a structure, which was once fundamental to Manana, has been lost. But the loss is replaced by, what Rykwert calls, "the haunting persistence of the vision."²⁵ Even in death, absolute physical erasure by fire, the hermit's story remains—the spot where his shack once stood, a persisting memory of a man that represented a life lived apart, as one newspaper headline put it, "his way."²⁶

Ray Phillips, a man who, according to David Boynton, preferred "nineteenth century living" and "lived a much more primitive lifestyle than anyone else" on Monhegan during the mid-twentieth century is an obvious object of reflective longing for origins. Ray Phillips was noteworthy largely because, to interested outsiders, he represented gestural "traces of us."²⁷ He was more than a historical memento, a substitute for what David Lowenthal calls, "the vanished landscape," to which the nostalgic seeker glances backward. Ray and his sheep living in isolation on a tiny island evoked for visitors, "a congruent social universe...of an earlier epoch."²⁸ When people saw Ray they were not looking at a static object in a museum. They were peeking in his windows for a glimpse of atavistic activity—activity, which possessed movement, because Ray was visibly and consistently interacting with the world as if that "earlier epoch" were still in play. The overall resulting impression of a man such as Ray is thus understandably a charming one.

²⁵ Rykwert, *On Adam's House*, 13.

²⁶ Del Giudice, "He lives his way," 33.

²⁷ David Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," *Geographical Review* 65, no. 1 (1975): 8.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 9

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3: "Professionally Eccentric"

Among professional eccentrics, 18th century English garden hermits—men employed by the nobility to play the role of "hermit" in their gardens—are perhaps the shrewdest businessmen of the bunch.

Edith Sitwell called these employed garden pets "Ornamental Hermits." She observed in the phenomenon, "Nothing, it was felt, could give such delight to the eye, as the spectacle of an aged person with a long gray beard, and a goatish rough robe, doddering about amongst the discomforts and pleasures of nature."

Such men were under contract to grow out their beards and nails, for a number of years, and were bound to a hut in the nobleman's gardens, where they could be observed going about their daily tasks.

In some cases, noblemen with perhaps too much time and money at their disposal would themselves adopt the lifestyle of the ornamental hermit. One particularly interesting case was that of Lord Brokeby—a man who lived in a hut by the sea and was described by many as oddly "amphibious," for he refused to leave his "eternal baths." Some also referred to the strange man as a "benevolent troll" and speculated that he ate raw human flesh.

Whatever the circumstances, melancholy was in fashion at the time and so such theatrically isolated men were of great interest.*

*Edith Sitwell, "Ornamental Hermits," in *English Eccentrics*, London: Faber & Faber, 1933.

In a Letter to the Editor, a reader commented on "The Price of Utopia on One Island," an article about Monhegan that appeared in the *New York Times* in 1972, praising the piece as a "letter from home," but asking the author for more current news on the island, as it had been a decade since her last visit. She specifically asked after Ray Phillips: "And the hermit, is he still grazing his sheep on Manana, taking them over to the island by boat?"²⁹ The respondent is concerned about whether things have changed on Monhegan since she was last home. In her response, there's a hint of a wish, a desire that the island should always remain, as she quotes from the *Times* article, "a million light years away," from the rest of the world. Ray Phillips is essential to the integrity of that image.

David Lowenthal talks about nostalgia as a kind of existential homelessness. It is "to live in an alien present," he argues.³⁰ Nostalgia is a "retreat," a "counterweight" an "absolution" and "atavistic longing for a natural order."³¹ It is a yearning for a

²⁹ Kline, "Fond Memories of Utopia," XX4.

³⁰ Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place," 2.

³¹ Ibid, 5.

distant imaginary landscape wherein lies some sense of origin, which offers redemption—a home. Rooted in a “sense of estrangement,” nostalgia therefore focuses on objects, which seem to represent those homebound sentiments, but in their present, are out of place. In terms of nostalgia, Lowenthal argues, the “object of the quest must...be anachronistic.”³²

This is particularly interesting considering Ardis Cameron’s sense of “true places,” which she says, are “where authenticity and realness are said to dwell.”³³ Authentically *real* spaces, she argues, “find expression in the discursive imaginary topographies of Otherness and so come down, not in maps, but in stories of alterity that mark *home* from *away*.”³⁴ True places are found in stories about those places, which reach beyond immediate grasp, stories told from and of *away*. Thus, the individual—the

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3: “Professionally Eccentric”

Charles Coffin, the self-proclaimed “Hermit of the Maine Desert,”—and purportedly “the most talked of, the most written of, and the most photographed man in town”—advertised his home in Freeport as a tourist attraction. Admission was 15 cents to take a tour of the old hermit’s collection of antiques. Featured in the tour was a musical instrument he’d built himself, which combined a piano and two organs and was played in “a most original manner.”*

*Freeport Historical Society, *Freeport* (Portsmouth: Acadia Publishing, 1996), 108.

“stranger with a camera,” as Cameron calls them—is doubly “estranged,” as they long for a place distant from their own, while are also bound to sit at a distance, telling stories about that far off, imaginary topography, always just out of reach.

The need to maintain a sense of alterity for authentic—and therefore touristic—solvency, creates problems in the identity of the othered-object of nostalgia. In Maine, Nathaniel Lewis points out that

³² Lowenthal, 4.

³³ Ardis Cameron, “When Strangers Bring Cameras: The Poetics and Politics of Othered Places,” *American Quarterly* 54, no. 3. (2002): 411.

³⁴ Ibid.

language advertising Maine tourism—“‘The reality,’ according to *Frommer’s*”—describes a vast, untouched wilderness, attractive for its physically and spiritually redemptive qualities. The result, argues Lewis, is “a long-enduring tension in our identity: Whether Maine is ‘The Way Life Should Be’ as the welcome signs at the state border once read, or whether it is ‘The Way Life *Used* to be.’”³⁵ Maine as “Vacationland,” depends on the vestiges of the state as it existed in an idyllic past. Visiting is supposed to signify a return to a “true place,” an original place, and, insofar as American vacations have historically been designed as “getaways” from the tedium of daily society, one that is all the more *real* because of its perceived distance from the precincts of (over)civilization.

Maintaining authenticity, however paradoxical that may sound, is hard work. It is a tricky balancing act between one’s own sense of identity and the expectations of the outsider. There are also the practical problems of economy and environmental sustainability. Given Monhegan’s economic dependence on summer tourism, this involves constant negotiation between islanders who want to work and live by their own terms and the kind of experience—“the rustic kind of a century or so ago”—which the island markets to summer visitors.³⁶ Monhegan Island’s downtown area is called Monhegan Plantation, which summons associations with national landmarks, museums like Plymouth Plantation,³⁷ but in direct conversation with these overtones, Ted Bernard

³⁵ Qtd. in Michael D. Burke, “Introduction,” in *Maine’s Place in the Environmental Imagination*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), viii.

³⁶ Bernard, “Into the Eighth Generation,” 70.

³⁷ Among the photo slides on Plymouth Plantation’s website (www.plimoth.org), one is of a woman holding a ceramic water jug and has a caption that reads: “You can’t change history but it *could* change you.” It is unclear to me what sort of experience this American tradition is supposed to offer a tourist.

insists, “This is a working island culture, *not* (emphasis added) a living history museum.”³⁸

One year-round resident Bernard interviewed for his study on Monhegan’s strategies for social, economic, and ecological sustainability, put the problem this way: “If we’re not careful, success will cause us to change this place to accommodate the tastes and meet the expectations of these short-termers. Then we’ll no longer have something unique to show.”³⁹ Simultaneously, there is the matter of too many tourists, as Bernard points out, “Might Monhegan tourists at some point be repelled by too many encounters with other tourists?”⁴⁰ At issue here is the islanders self-awareness of the gaze of the outsider and how that awareness implicates them in a not-so-authentic project of building authenticity. Bernard surmises that at the root of this problem is how to simultaneously create a haven for the self and a haven for the tourist, “Island people don’t want to ruin either what tourists come to experience or what they themselves cherish.”⁴¹ How then does one live life *their own way*, while accommodating the ways of others?

³⁸ Bernard, “Into the Eighth Generation,” 72.

³⁹ Ibid, 79.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 72.

⁴¹ Ibid, 65.

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2: "Hermits and their Seekers"

There's a tendency among hermit-seekers, likely driven by their own interests and possibly the suggestive nature of long, white thinking-beards, to highlight and hyperbolize the "philosophical" qualities of Maine's reclusive woodsmen.

For example, Michael Finkel, a famous fabulist with all sorts of ego-driven issues of his own, paints Christopher Knight, the North Pond Hermit, as an intellectual akin to himself: "I'd mentioned in my letter that I was an avid reader. From what I could tell, Knight was, too." He then goes on to lists some of Knight's favorite reading material, including, Rudyard Kipling's "lesser known works," James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and, coincidentally, *National Geographic Magazine*, where much of Finkel's current work is published.

The innocuously curious journalist, having sufficiently intellectualized the hermit, reportedly sits before Knight, "[feeling] like some great mystic was about to reveal the Meaning of Life." *

*Michael Finkel, "The Strange & Curious Tale of the Last True Hermit," *GQ*, August 4, 2014.

Monhegan's hermit is an excellent example of this type of social negotiation. While Ray's popular reputation paints him as Manana's sole shepherd, a reclusive holy man, with emphasis on the books he kept in his home and the notes he was said to have scribbled on his walls,⁴² "[Ray] wasn't a particularly deep thinker, or doing it for philosophical reasons, so much as, this is just how he enjoyed living," says David Boynton.⁴³ In an interview with the *Boston Globe* Ray recognizes that his simple life apart identifies with American transcendentalist ideals, concerning simplicity and the examined life, but he suggests that such comparisons are more unconscious associations, by-products of his lifestyle choices, which are not intentionally ideologically motivated:

"I don't think I'm different from other people; any number of people think the same as I do...It's people from the city and freak journalists who want to look for something to write about. There are 500 people just like me up the Maine coast who live on islands, maybe with some sheep, practically alone. I'm nothing unusual."⁴⁴

⁴² Del Giudice, "He lives his way."

⁴³ Interview, August 20, 2015

⁴⁴ Del Giudice, "He lives his way."

Ray insists on his normality and rejects the idea that his lifestyle is any way reactionary to the urban New York scene he left forty years before. He is not making a political statement, or asking for attention. He is simply living a life that fits him.

Ray, however, was said to bear all of the speculation and publicity with modest incredulity and a good-natured sort of indifference. Ray did not solicit attention, and at times was said to “baa” at tourists whose too-long presence was growing tiresome, but he often let people come into his home to poke about. In fact, he had a remarkable sense of humor about it all.

David Boynton, for example, tells a story about Ray’s interaction with a man who came to survey the electrical needs of Monhegan when electricity was to be installed: At first, Ray told the surveyor he didn’t need or want electricity in his home, but as the man turned to leave Ray suddenly thought of something he could use it for. He told the surveyor: “I’d like to get a big red flashing sign that says ‘The Shepherd’s Club’ and put it on my front porch and flash it at Monhegan.”⁴⁵ Ray knew that he was one of Monhegan’s tourist attractions—a “real icon”—which curious visitors could ogle at in person or purchase a postcard photo of to send home.⁴⁶ Yet, there is no evidence that Ray felt the purity of his hermit lifestyle was spoiled by the presence of others. Ray’s handling of tourists is admirable in that it is hospitable, but also largely ignores their expectations. Regardless of whether or not Ray was under a spotlight, he went on living his life as he always had, laughing at outside interest while retaining a private self.

It is clear that what for one person is a retreat, for another is life and livelihood and most certainly hard work. Altering one’s behavior, or even performing those tasks

⁴⁵ Del Giudice.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

with the expectation that they will be watched, is antithetical not only to the project of the hermit, but to that of a living, breathing, real identity-at-work. The legend of the Hermit of Manana Island perhaps teaches us that the expectations “from away,” *should* be challenged—not anticipated and imitated. I speculate that Ray Phillips’ independent spirit, and general lack of (or need for) self-awareness is what drew people to him, why so many wrote him letters. Ray’s old way of doing things challenged theirs, but I suspect, in a much more unassuming, and therefore performatively meaningful, way than the legend might tell it.

Up Close: The Hermit in Ruin

It's difficult to address Paradise without its loss, Eden without ruin. Their interaction is what *makes* the story after all.⁴⁷ Likewise, the simple, obvious fact of island life—its particular sensitivity to the reality of edges and entropy—makes the latter term unavoidable and necessary to discuss.

Conceptions of Eden or Paradise are not static artifacts of memory, but processual ones. Similarly, island life is noticeably subject to process. Caitlin DeSilvey, in her analysis of the mutability of cultural artifacts and the challenges it poses to curators, observes in her own work that perhaps, “the drive toward stabilizing the thing was part of the problem.” The problem, of course, being that “protected stasis” is illusory.⁴⁸ Loss to decay is always part of the picture whether we acknowledge it or not.

Acknowledging ruin is a valuable exercise in that, “the disarticulation of the object may lead to the articulation of other histories, and other geographies.” In ruin, we might recognize other possible lives—tales—amongst the eroded bits of an object, because decay too, possesses its own direction and movement. It is in this “admixture of waste and life, of decadence and vitality,” through which the “procreative⁴⁹ power of decay,” is at work, making re-generation possible.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ N.B. “Genesis,” the biblical creation story and a term, which the OED defines as, “the action of building up from simple or basic elements to more complex ones.”

⁴⁸ Caitlin DeSilvey, “Observed Decay: Telling Stories with Mutable Things,” *Journal of Material Culture* 11, no. 3 (2006): 324-6.

⁴⁹ Another appropriate synonym might be, “*generative*.”

⁵⁰ DeSilvey, “Observed Decay,” 320-4.

Outlaws and Oddities: The Pine Tree State from the Peripheral(2016)

3: "The Pitiful & the Profane"

A 1933 editorial piece in the *Lewiston Evening Journal* essentially tears the romantic face off New England hermithood in a rant, "On Hermits."* The article, signed A.G.S., is a response to a news story that reported on the (oddly groundhog-like) movements of a hermit in Waco, Ontario who was "due 'out' anytime now." The article, which stressed the fact that the hermit burned newspapers and regardless of whether, "banks, nations, kings, [failed]," would stand, "firm on the few acres he [had] cleared," thoroughly romanticized his lifestyle.

The *Evening Journal* columnist claims that he's met several hermits in Maine, and none have much going for them (the most accomplished of which being a hermit who sold "doughnut-lifters," which were very literally twigs picked up off of the ground, and a hermit whose relative had invented an umbrella with a window, because "It IS difficult to see through an umbrella").

A.G.S. maintains that hermits "seemed to have about as much life as a clam" and "were not worthy of much copy." The romance embedded in their lives is largely imagined and actual experience proved them to be dirty, lazy, and irresponsible.

A.G.S. closes his rant on a disdainful note, describing his most recent encounter with a northern Maine hermit: "HE did not look clean. The place smelled. I did not like it; I wouldn't go ten feet to see another hermit."

*A.G.S. "On Hermits," *Lewiston Evening Journal*, Jan 31, 1933, 4.

Upon inspecting the details of Ray Phillip's life, Ray's legend begins to break down. He loses some of his mystique. The image is gap-ridden, discordant and ill-fitted in places—perhaps to puzzlingly *human* for our liking. The legend is much smoother, cleaner and so more comfortable to talk about. Collecting all of these eroded bits and erroneous details, which are really the most tangible materials of Ray's life, undercuts the felt-presence his legend provided.

The mystical fallout is all part of the natural processes of storytelling—the discrepancies, which arise between stories *as they happened* from some vantage point and the stories we tell ourselves and others at a displaced time. There is also the reality of the private life of the individual, fraught with ruin, and simultaneously the complexities of the individual, which are subject to ruin under a public gaze—even more so in death. Something is clearly lost here, but it is not certain what is gained.

Hermits, as Edith Sitwell documents them in *English Eccentrics*, traditionally represent ideal states that reach beyond the effects of ruin: "Whilst

these [hermits] of varying respectability were trying, in their several ways, to preserve their lives, others, equally, or more praiseworthy, were trying to escape the consequences of being alive.”⁵¹ The escape from ruin garners the greater part of public attention. The hermit appears as a redeemer, some kind of solution to the ruinous forces of the alienated modern individual. *How* this solution plays out, in other words, how the hermit secures their own survival and preserves their person is dramatized often for effect. In the popular imagination Ray lives simply and enjoys “the good life.” But the closer we get to *how*, its logistics, obstacles, and everyday monotony, the magic of it all begins to lose some of its quality. It seems that any authentic Paradise *is* necessarily interacting with its own ruin.

David Boynton repeatedly referred to the physical details of Ray’s life as “interesting.” He appeared to use the term euphemistically. He says of Ray’s house, “well it was interesting. It was pretty dirty because the sheep lived there,” adding, “not a place that I’d want to live.” Ray’s “interesting lifestyle,” is characterized by a dwelling mired in ruin—floors littered in sheep feces, rooms in disrepair, and the whole home sitting on a foundation of, what looked like, eroding toothpicks.⁵² Additionally Ray, says one interviewee in Elisabeth Harris’s documentary, looked like a “homeless person,” adding “it wasn’t someone you’d want to invite home for dinner.”⁵³ Boynton said that because the sheep lived with him, an unpleasant odor usually hung around Ray so, “people didn’t want to stand real close,” because he never did get around to installing plumbing in the place, though he’d purchased the materials.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Edith Sitwell, *English Eccentrics* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1957).

⁵² Interview, August 20, 2015.

⁵³ *The Hermit of Manana* (2006).

⁵⁴ Interview, August 20, 2015.

DeSilvey reflects that the decaying cultural remains she finds, “spark simultaneous—and contradictory—sensations [for her] of repugnance and attraction.”⁵⁵ Ruin disrupts order, confuses the articulation of an object, and makes structures unsafe for human occupation.⁵⁶ The resulting ambiguity is thus repugnant, even threatening. Yet, as DeSilvey points out, there is something attractive about things which are out of place or do not look as they should. We find ourselves compelled to explore the gaps.

Hans Grumbrecht writes in “Identifying Fragments,” that the constant play of “emerging” and “vanishing” forms, means that we never reach, “a state that we would associate with ‘completion’ or ‘rest,’” and so are continually refused “the corresponding sense of relief.” Consequently, our “intuition of a lack” immediately stimulates an imaginative “restitution” of the ruined object.⁵⁷ The sight of something “repugnant” attracts us to an interaction with it.

Island living involves a constant awareness of limits and boundaries, outside of which is an ever-changing unfathomable expanse that is not fit for habitation. Keeping the island habitable is a primary concern. People are careful to repurpose what they use and compost organic materials.⁵⁸ Island living is a constant interaction with waste—a respect for both its threats and possibilities.

Ray Phillips’ lifestyle expressed this, perhaps past the perceived point of human habitability. His dwelling was made of driftwood and recycled parts of old ships. He used his bathtub for storing sheep shearings, and decorated his home with old fading buoys.

⁵⁵ DeSilvey, “Observed Decay,” 320.

⁵⁶ N.B. The ruins of the hermit’s dwelling were burned down, because they were believed to be structurally unstable and dangerous to visitors.

⁵⁷ Hans Grumbrecht, “Identifying Fragments,” in *The Powers of Philology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 10-15.

⁵⁸ Bernard, *Hope and Hard Times*.

The construction of his home itself was a restitution of identifiably ruined parts, taken from their original contexts and brought into a new order, which seemed to be decaying itself. It's no wonder Ray's "rambling shack," received so many curious visitors.

However, seeing Ray in the context of ruin, essentially in the context of what many considered to be poverty, complicates his legend. Some, said David Boynton, thought the hermit was "lazy," that "his lifestyle was at a very low level and... [he didn't have] the ambition to fix it up." This creates a very different picture of Ray—one of destitution, which does not support higher ideals about idyllic isolation. Ray's income comes largely from social security checks and he often discussed how having a wife or installing plumbing or electricity was "too expensive" for him. However, there was no mention of laziness in the newspaper articles on Ray—only commentary on the distinction between his "civilized life" and the day he decided to "go fishin'" and never returned.⁵⁹

David Boynton talks about how poor parts of Maine were around the mid-20th century. Year-round residents on Monhegan have historically struggled to maintain the economic and environmental sustainability of their island in the face of external changes on the mainland, which marginalize them, and make interaction and mutual dependence in the global market difficult. When tourists come to Monhegan they do not experience or understand the natural environment of Monhegan in the same way that locals do. Michael Burke similarly reflects on the relationship between Mainers and their surroundings: "their experience and conception of the environment was not a rural fantasy, not a restorative wilderness, not a refuge from the realm of culture, not simply an idea at all,

⁵⁹ Del Giudice, "He lives his way."

but a real place to be put to use, and heavy use at that.”⁶⁰ Carolyn Chute defines authenticity in Maine by landscapes that are “studded with the detritus of human work and play,” which are essentially honest in their exhibition. She writes:

Home is supposed to be private isn’t it? Lots of us have assorted useful stuff around our yards—tractors, tractor parts, truck tires, wooden skids, plastic industrial pails, rolled up chicken wire, tree houses (the lopsided kind made by kids), old cars, old appliances. This comes from freedom, from not worrying what other people think. Visitors don’t look at your stuff anyway...They mostly look at *you*. They come to visit *you*, the person they know quadriillions of rumors and truths about...There’s no hiding *you*. You don’t need to. *That’s* freedom.⁶¹

Freedom for Chute, as it was for Ray, is a shameless interaction with ruin that refuses to hide behind an illusion of preservation, which (like a legendary status) is its own kind of imprisonment in stasis. Uninhibited interaction with one’s environment is where home—the ideal home—rests.

When Ray was asked in an interview about whether he was happy living on Manana Island he said: “I’m very contented I have everything...except youth. I’d like to be young, I’d like to be 16...I’d like to get hold of that ram standing up on the mountain. I’d like to slit his throat.”⁶² Ray confronts the reality of his own mortality and is unashamedly nostalgic for his more youthful days, contending with the forces of nature. In his statement, too there is perhaps a wish that he could have stayed a bit longer with

⁶⁰ Burke, *Maine’s Place in the Environmental Imagination*, 6.

⁶¹ Wesley McNair, *The Quotable Moose: a contemporary Maine reader* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), 229.

⁶² Del Giudice, “He lives his way.”

his sheep on Manana—that there, where he worked daily by the shifting sea water under the gaze of the Sun, was his Paradise.

2. IMAGINARY LANDSCAPE: “THE HERMIT’S METAMORPHOSIS”

The stones in the path cut my feet as I ran, but I thought of the joy of bathing them in the tank, and that made the wounds sweet to me. My Father, I have heard of the temptations which in times past assailed the holy Solitaries of the desert, flattering the reluctant flesh beyond resistance; but none, I think, could have surpassed in ecstasy that first touch of the water on my limbs...And the water, my Father, seemed to crave me as I craved it. Its ripples rose about me, first in furtive touches, then in a long embrace that clung and drew me down; till at length they lay like kisses on my lips. It was no frank comrade like the mountain pools of my childhood, but a secret playmate compassionating my pains and soothing them with noiseless hands. From the first I thought of it as an accomplice--its whisper seemed to promise me secrecy if I would promise it love. And I went back and back to it, my Father; all day I lived in the thought of it; each night I stole to it with fresh thirst.

--Edith Wharton, “The Hermit and the Wild Woman”

I am alone on the rooftop. It is quiet, except for the faint hiss of steam rising from the empty streets below. Rippling rivers of asphalt, under which I am sure subterranean bubbles are coalescing, preparing to boil over curbs and onto sidewalks and up against storefronts. I breathe with difficulty, swallowing air in large gulps that press hard on my chest. There is only heat and heaviness.

Indifferent obelisks, a forest of concrete trunks—their hypothetical inhabitants sleeping behind dark windows in dark rooms—surround me. A massive semi-circle of light hangs dramatically behind these skyscrapers. It is fantastically massive, almost comically so, like a poorly scaled set design. Or rather it would be comical, if it was not so aggressively real—so filled with living energy.

And then, there is some fracture in the image, or memory, when I missed it, when my focus was directed elsewhere, at the sweat-filled creases of my body. And the ignominy of it all.

The great, too-real celestial sphere must have either jumped across the cityscape, or consumed it completely, in a swift shift from background to foreground. Potential to kinetic. I am, without warning, face to face with plasma and light and naked convection.

I cannot look to the right, left, or above without seeing a deep, assaulting amber. The heat is extreme. It cuts through the humidity, making the air lighter, but dry, more like fire. When I inhale, readying myself for a scream, I inhale flames. I inhale flames and razor-like wounds where shame copulates and thrives.

Elaine woke one morning as an amphibian with a sore throat. Her body was pimpled and chilly, cocooned in damp bed linen. She felt like a toad wrapped in a great blanket of moss on a bed of cold earth, with two watery eyes, and a tongue that flickers incessantly, feeling for water and small things to eat.

“To enter the savage interior of the wild—where it is hypothesized all sense of self is dispersed, and during a prolonged stay, is irretrievable—is to relinquish a history and cause. Nonetheless, locals turn to familiar psychoanalytic tropes to determine the “CAUSE OF SOCIAL SUICIDE” of their favorite hermit characters. Most common among these are hermits said to have lost great loves— attractive, highly sought-after local women with capable hands and childbearing hips. It is generally agreed upon in these cases that the greatest of society’s ills is the unfaithful female and thus the sole cause of the hermit’s retreat.”

--The Book of New England Hermit Lore (4th ed.)

Though in general she was closer in likeness to those toads collected by curious, but forgetful children, who provide their captives with Nike shoe-boxes, but neglect to give them food or companionship after only a few days of interest. Such displaced toads, when discovered dead a week later, are remembered as inexplicable tragedies among their neglectful captors, whose autopsies failed to determine a cause of death.

Unlike her amphibian cousins, however, Elaine preferred a veritable shoe-box—300 ft.² of studio apartment space, which she occupied

alone—to the God-given habitat she’d once called home.

Elaine moved to the edge of the bed and studied her lower figure. Her thighs, she thought, looked like two doughy loaves rising into one another. She lifted them a little to watch some of their mass fall into a valley. She ran her hands down to her knees and back up again, frowning at the friction she felt there.

Hair is a perpetual problem for any humanoid purist. So Elaine necessarily coveted smooth, uncomplicated surfaces. The ideal body is no noticeable body at all—a figure that slips easily, unobtrusively between spaces, that is, in fact

“Friction, as everyone knows, is the primal stuff of animals and so is an uncomfortable reality in the private lives of humans.”
--R.E. Wolf

indistinguishable from the texture and color of a wall painted eggshell white. Facing the bathroom wall with her back to a cracked mirror, Elaine removed her clothing and stepped into an icy shower. Emancipated—mind shocked to awareness, body stunned, idling, anesthetized—under a frigid cascade.

With the careful eye of a surgeon, she removed all hair from her body and scalp. Her skin was near perfect in places. But around the forearms and shins there were ugly, pearly ridges and old, oblong, chemically-induced thermophilic springs from earlier, much darker, trials with blades and chemicals. Today, her bathroom rituals were a common procedure she performed on an alien body—a body that she was, nevertheless, obligated to carry.

“The New England hermit is a resilient sort of fellow. During the winter months, when resources are scarce and times are lean, hermits may enter a period of hibernation to conserve both food and energy. During such periods of fasting, the hermit is, on the reports of unwelcome passersby, said to experience psychological stress (more so than the usual stresses of isolation of course), showing symptoms such as apathy, irritability, and, in severe cases, delirium.”

—*The Book of New England Hermit Lore (4th ed.)*

It was mid-July, but she dressed in layers. First, a one-piece solid black bathing suit over which she wore a turtleneck and slim, dark jeans. Then, a cheap wig with straight blonde, shoulder-length synthetic hair.

Elaine did not care for aesthetics. She was not beautiful, nor did she ever imagine

herself to be. But she could appreciate the paleness of her skin and manage to suppress self-criticism concerning her long face, wide lips and small eyes.

That morning, Elaine was breaking one of her week-long fasts, so she selected a banana for breakfast to alleviate some of the cramping in her limbs. The banana was difficult to eat. She discarded half.

There was something burdensome about input sometimes—the urge for input, at least. Food encumbered, even implicated her in new aggregations of superfluous body tissue. More obligatory care.

Abstaining was a meditation, a hushed refrain, which in turn quieted the body. She liked the feeling of lightness, especially in her fingers, the way they seemed to float over surfaces. Their material apathy made them all the more graceful. She liked to imagine her cells as empty bubbles of air, floating in thin, almost translucent rivers of blood. Thus emptied, she was wraithlike, ideal.

Elaine worked as a telemarketer. Cloistered in a cubicle under dim halogen bulbs with a musty odor sitting under her nose, she sold vitamins of all shapes and sizes to people. She left at six o'clock for a seven o'clock shift every weekday morning to walk twenty blocks or so to a big concrete building, squared with sooted sides and fitted with small, rectangular windows. She avoided the subway, where people and rats swarmed underground, almost indistinguishable from one another.

Elaine left her apartment at her usual time, by her usual way, and arrived five minutes before seven, whereupon she read from a script for eight hours, ate a few carrots, some sunflower seeds, and talked mostly to answering machines, selling nearly nothing,

except to an old man who'd read that fish oil would increase his life expectancy by at least ten years. He bought five boxes.

On her way home from work, Elaine stopped in at a local market. It was crowded, its pulse discordant and anxious, and the lines were long. A tall check-out boy with long hair and a bad case of acne spotted her and

*If you live for nothing
else, live for the solitary
flower.
--R.E. Wolf*

waved her over to a previously closed aisle. Elaine pretended at first not to see him, but Adam was, as always, persistent. And it was his eagerness that irritated her. She made reluctant eye contact and shuffled over.

"Hey Elaine!"

"Hi, Adam." She paid considerable attention to emptying her basket. She was handling a package of celery when a rose was shoved in her face, the thorns almost touching her nose.

"For you—clipped it from a bouquet when no one was looking."

"Thanks, Adam."

"It's a madhouse in here, huh?" He took his time scanning her items.

"Mhm."

"I like your hair, Elaine. Did you change the color?" Adam's hands fumbled with a can of black beans. He dropped them. Kneeling down to retrieve the can---"Well, I like it."

"Thanks."

"Nice out, huh? Aren't you hot in that turtleneck?"

"Not really."

Adam lifted a bag of greens—“Cilantro or parsley?”

“Cilantro.”

“Making dinner for you—or for *two*?” Adam sang that last part, emphasizing the rhyme, while he bagged the rest of the items.

“Just me.” Elaine took her time locating her wallet in her purse.

“Well, I was, uh wondering,” He paused to clear his throat, “if you were busy again this weekend? Because I thought we might—“

“Sorry Adam. I am actually.” Her eyes searching for anywhere else to look but the terrain of his face—pockmarked disappointment, that summited in dark, round Labrador eyes. If he noticed that her cheeks were burning, she could only hope he didn’t take it as a sign of nervous interest.

“Oh, well you’ll tell me when you aren’t?”

“Sure.”

But of course Elaine was not busy. Her nights into the foreseeable future would consist of an early dinner and cleansing routines that somehow always took hours to move through.

Elaine’s day was significantly brightened by the contents of her mailbox. July’s issue of *Misanthropic Monthly*, a magazine marketed toward “Embittered Homo Sapien Expatriates,” awaited her. The publication spotlighted tales of isolated dwellings in remote landscapes, rugged guys that hunted rabbits and built Dick Proenneke cabins in exotic places, and ancient men with long shaman beards, soft eyes, and friendly forest companions. Elaine’s favorite column entitled, “From the Enclosure,” was written by a woman living alone in the Maine Woods who signed her name R.E. Wolf. She wrote

***The Quest for Big-Booted Bean:
Maine's Most Elusive Hermit***

(Originally printed in National Geographic)

By Arnold Fink

"When I confronted Bean, it was the first contact the hermit had made with another human being in decades. He was stubbornly silent, or maybe out of practice—as authentic as any hermit I've ever met in my far-flung travels—but I gained his confidence surprisingly quickly.

Bean must have sensed a kindred spirit in me. He and I, being rugged men with quite a bit in common philosophically, took to each other straight away. It was clear we shared a mutual love of all things wild and untouched.

I asked Bean about his time in the woods: Why had he gone into the wild? What did any of it mean? Answers to those questions, which I indeed acquired, and will address soon enough.

But first, an account of how I found Bean and procured his most deeply private thoughts about the true nature of humanity...

pieces that meditated on silence and solitude and were filled with small, but astute observations “for the female intellect.” But beyond its elegant descriptions, Elaine was captivated by how fiercely solitary Wolf was—how isolation seemed to be fundamental to her nature.

In this month's issue of the magazine there were several cabin stories, an essay on the lost art of hoboeing, ads for DeadShot Winchester rifles, EverFlame kerosene lamps, hand-made Birch Bark Bibles and a short story about an urban-dwelling hermit and his “pending” nirvana in-transit, who crawls through the accumulated trash heaps in his apartment, and in a strange twist, finds enlightenment in his closet. Wolf's column appeared in the magazine after an ad for Pine Tar Bug Repellent.

Concerning the Wallpaper

I woke this morning to find that the flowers on the wallpaper had moved an inch to the right during an overnight journey eastward. I was not altogether surprised. They've been conspiring for weeks now. Awake in bed at night, I could hear the bluebells bickering with the hydrangea about which direction to move, debating their departure time, and the logistics of each moving part—should the stems embark first with the leaves in tow and then call to the flowers last after they'd settled in? Or should the flowers take the lead? When the discussions got too heated, the primroses would step in, bending a single white petal in a gesture like a finger to the lips—hushing them—and the bickering would stop. Evidently, they held their final council when I was asleep, for when I woke this morning they had shifted and rearranged successfully. I swear I heard snickers from the wall. Upon closer study, it appears the flowers had oriented themselves to capture more sunlight. I shut the blinds, barring contact between the rebels and their agitator, eyeing the wallflowers with satisfied contempt. Control over one's space is foremost the maintenance of a Room of One's Own Design.

--R.E. Wolf

Elaine drew her curtains and slept.

On her way to work the next day, Elaine was grabbed by a man with long, strong fingers.

“Hey beautiful, why you hidin’ that body under a turtleneck?” Cigarette smoke assaulted her face. His grip tightened.

In her mind she declared, *Get the fuck off of me* and promptly kicked her assailant in the groin. But Elaine’s mind and body were conditioned differently. All she seemed to be able to do was serve him a pained, pleading smile, which said something closer to, *I’m naïve and defenseless, please, pretty please, leave me alone*. It sickened her.

And then a cane came from nowhere, a hard thwack to the cigarette man’s shoulder.

“Charles Eustis Abbot. Why in God’s name are you bothering this woman?” A bent lady beat him repeatedly on the back of his shoulder blades. Charles Eustis Abbot

backed off. “Look, you’ve scared her half to death—*good for nothing, idiotic, thankless child.*”

He released Elaine’s arm, cringing, as the old woman beat him half way into the street.

“Geez, alright, I get it Vi— I was just jokin’ around”

She hit him again. “That one was for your mother.”

“Okay, *okay*” The man lit another cigarette and slouched off down the street, walking with purpose, as if some other man had just been trounced by an old woman’s cane.

“Thanks a lot” said Elaine, offering her arm to the old woman instinctively, “He caught me off guard, that’s all” She helped the woman up the curb and back onto the sidewalk.

“Oh, it’s no trouble, no trouble at all.” said the old woman in a sort of speech that rumbled. She was stout and toadlike about the face, but she had a kind smile.

Straightening her technicolored cardigan, “I’m Violet. You?” She pointed with a crooked finger at Violet’s chest, which was eye level with her dark, crinkled eyes.

“Elaine,” she said, stiffening her posture and readjusting her wig.

“Well, Elaine—help a woman on her way?—these streets are dangerous” She winked. They moved along the sidewalk slowly, the old woman’s cane marking out each step before it came.

“You know, Charlie wouldn’t hurt a fly. He’s just a pain the ass. Since he was a child, I swear. Got a chip missing, ya know?” She pointed to the space above her ear—that spot in the brain where sanity chips are placed. The ones that program you not to

grab random women in the street. “His poor mother...” She shook her head. “Men are pigs, Elly. They don’t always mean to be. Just gotta smack ‘em on the snout every once in a while ya know?” She patted Elaine on the hand.

They of spoke of small, yet comfortably mundane, things as they went on their way—the poor state of city sidewalks, the oppressive heat, and the many ineptitudes of male youths.

This should have been easy, but Elaine was struggling. At one level she felt an inadvertent intimacy with this woman. She wanted to move with her, get to know her, spend afternoons drinking iced tea on her balcony, talking about the state of things in a bygone golden era, the many men she’d known, and the many children she’d raised. These scenes, possibilities in a projected future, flickered before her. But on another, more conscious plane, Elaine was uncomfortable. Her palms were sweating pretty badly. She was embarrassed by them, considering whether the old woman felt them. Whether she minded at all. Elaine thought about how she didn’t really know this woman and how weird it was to be this close to her, about how creepy it was to be thinking, even vaguely, about their perennial friendship-to-be. She moved between these two spaces—mind and body in conflict, refusing to move in tandem, to make a decision about how she was supposed to feel. On one hand she was lonely. This woman had reached out to her, an ally without hesitation. And on the other, Violet was nothing more than a graying, wrinkled foreign object, who was repulsed by her sweaty palms, but was too nice to say anything about it.

“Violet?”

“Hm?”

“My work is down Church St. So I’ll have to leave you at the crosswalk.”

Violet nodded.

When they reached the intersection Elaine said, “Maybe I’ll see you again around this time tomorrow?”

“Sure, dear.” Violet gave Elaine a little affectionate pat. “’Til then, look out for creeps with missing chips.” Elaine nodded.

Elaine left the woman waiting for the walk signal and took a right onto Church.

She was halfway down the street, enjoying scenes from their prospective next meeting, when there was a terrible screeching coming from behind her, tires on pavement, a crash, and yelling. And then, that unsettling silence that immediately follows in the wake of recognized tragedy. All in quick succession. She froze.

“The New England Hermit is not generally considered to be a scientific man, to ‘live so sturdily and Spartan-like’ as to ‘drive life into a corner and reduce it to its lowest terms,’ (for debates on Thoreau’s hermit-status look to one of my earlier publications: Posers of the North). Nor is he fully a man of God. Nor truly a beastly figure (though there are more deviant strains. See: “Bangor’s Insane Hermit”). Rather, the hermit’s life is fundamentally defined by trauma and tragedy and the solace that solitude offers in such circumstances.”

--The Book of New England Hermit Lore (4th edition).

Elaine turned, glacial, cautiously moving toward the scene. From what she could tell, at a distance, there was blood pooling around one of the tires. When she got closer, it was all friction. She saw the mangled body, frizzy gray hair covering the face, the SUV unscathed by Violet’s small, virtually inconsequential frame. The cane was on the sidewalk across from where they’d parted. It had made it to the other side, but the woman had not. Mangled flesh. Elaine stopped. She had seen all she needed to. Mangled flesh.

She should have helped her cross the street. She could have been there. She *should* have

been there. Why had she not been there? She knew why she had not been there.

Corrupted flesh.

Elaine went home. There was torn flesh in her waking hours, and when she could manage sleep, flesh in her dreams, blood spilling everywhere. And she'd wake up pimpled, damp, toadlike, but now truly displaced, living in a foreign shoe-box. She couldn't explain the depth of her remorse, why it was so overwhelming. Nonetheless, Elaine purged. She did not go to work or leave her home. She stopped eating. All movement was minimal. Her rituals came undone.

It was all too wild an unpredictable. The relentless cacophony of the city—of things moving and announcing themselves—emergency vehicle sirens that followed in such quick succession it was just one continuous, shrill note, mothers yelling at their wildly fearless children to *hold hands godammit* and doors slamming and sex and life and death and excruciating pain. Contact was so fleeting, near-impossible. And for a moment she'd held an old woman's hand amidst it all, and the hand was warm and soft. And then it was vacant, cold, claimed by a deep, unfathomable void.

All communication lost.

Elaine had committed herself to atheism nearly five years ago. But after that day she found she could believe again. Her God was a hateful and vengeful deity with a darkly twisted sense of humor.

Last night the forest was racked to near erasure. Leaves and branches stripped from trees, a terrible Olympian thundering, and great slashes of lightning cutting through the sky and setting all ablaze. And then the rains came and washed out the wounds. Then a hollow feeling in the morning as things set themselves to the task of healing (which is always a hollow-feeling exercise at first) with what was left. Despite all this, we rebuild.

--R.E. Wolf

In the month's time Elaine spent paralyzed in her apartment, the landlord had taken to leaving her mail outside her door, and posting not-so-subtle reminders about rent. One day that mail contained the August edition of *Misanthropic Monthly*. Lately, Elaine had taken to drawing flowers on her walls, daring them to move without her permission, in order to occupy herself. This was her first outside stimulation in weeks.

Elaine immediately flipped to "The Enclosure." An unexpected slip of paper fell into her lap. At first glance it was one of those inserts they put in for magazine subscriptions. When she turned it over, however, it was something else.

TO OUR FEMALE READERS:

The female hermit population is dwindling! All across America seemingly well-adjusted women are leaving our ranks for a proper life in society!

Join your sister solitaires in the Maine Woods for a support group during the first Saturday of each month, meet some of our writers, and swap stories. Come help us keep the way of the hermitess alive!

The trees were dense, but the path was clear. Elaine approached the clearing around noon. There was a kind of heavy, ancient drapery about the place (though Elaine knew nothing about trees and could not place the affect). It was already populated with odd-looking women. She estimated about seven or eight. Some old, some young, some clean, some not, and some that looked dull and dusty, like they hadn't seen daylight in years.

Elaine stood behind a tree, observing them, wondering how she might look to them. Just as odd? But they didn't really look out of place. It was likely that she did. She had left her wig at home, but felt as though she was noticeably overdressed. Some

women were near-naked and others wore sturdy outdoor attire. There were no dark, intellectual turtlenecks here.

The women wandered in and around a roughly-drawn circle of log benches, in the center of which there was a small fire burning. They did not really acknowledge one another. Some inspected trees, others sat quietly underneath them feeding squirrels and chipmunks, one was humming some folk fossil of a tune while she knitted. A few sat in what she assumed was their communal arena, equidistant, one to a log, as far from one another as possible, playing with their hands, braiding their hair. One was snoring into her chest.

Behind the log circle there was a cabin. It sat on a rock foundation with a porch and a rocking chair and all sorts of odds and ends hanging about it. There were wax candles that looked like someone had stepped on them while they were still cooling on the porch railing, a mounted bear's head on the wall, and wind charms made of old cans and tools that were rusted but still scraping some music out of each other. The stairs looked weak with rot. They sagged when a very tall older woman stepped down them, carrying a heavy-looking cast-iron kettle and a tray of clay mugs.

She seemed to be the matriarch of it all, because when she stepped outside several heads looked up in her direction as if awaiting instruction. She was quite tall with short, curly hair and cheeks that sat up high on her face. She wore small, round spectacles and a sharp sort of expression. She set the kettle over the fire on a stand of the same make and laid the tray on a nearby stump.

Elaine was ill at ease. What was she even doing hundreds of miles from home in a strange place with strange women? What were they going to do exactly? In truth, Elaine

had not come to meet or share with them. She'd come to find Wolf. Absently she rubbed her bare head, expecting a felt-like texture. She hadn't shaved in days. Oddly, it was as smooth as ever, but slick with sweat. She needed water.

A large twig snapped, announcing some previously unknown presence. Startled she looked down to her left, where sat an emaciated woman beneath a large red pine tree engaged in stitching a wreath of wildflowers together. She was so slight and small and pale, with a kind of greenish tint to her skin, and wearing a dress that was light, almost translucent, almost like lichen on a tree, that it was easy to overlook her. She had the appearance of dampness about her, as if she'd been there all night long and the morning dew had collected on her skin, like the petals of an unopened flower.

"Are you—are you here with the group over there?" Elaine pointed to the clearing.

The woman made no indication that she heard, only lifted her eyes and directed them elsewhere, it seemed, far off behind Elaine. They caught some of the light between the trees. A light azure—like her blue, blue veins. When she pulled her head back into the shadows, down to her work, they darkened from clear, shallow sky to murky ocean depths. And then the petals closed—a dewy unopened flower again.

"The term 'hermit' is gendered, indicating a male recluse. Thus, when we discuss the hermit, we are exclusively addressing men. There is no substantial precedent to make an equivalent feminine term necessary in common use."

**--The Book of New
England Hermit Lore**

There was something cosmic in her body—like she was made up of star dust from giant celestial bodies with a significant gravity of their own, despite being atomized. Elaine felt she could reach out and grab the woman's hand and only come up with a

Anna and Ed

Anna was a writer. Ed was a poet.

Anna wrote, but not very often. She had trouble finding solitude. Ed was always playing with her hair and whispering verses to her that she didn't care to hear, always muddling the silence.

Sometimes Anna slapped Ed. Then Ed would pout pitifully and Anna would cradle him to sleep. Anna forgot how sensitive Ed was at times. Ed, after all, was a gothic poet, and so had to think about death and romance at the same time. And that was hard and so Ed drank.

Anna did not like it when Ed read to her. She found it particularly annoying when it was her turn to read—to read Ed's poems back to him. Ed liked to hear them read by a woman. He felt that when Anna read to him, he experienced his poems anew, as if he did not write them himself, but was discovering their delights for the first time.

One day, Anna left for the sea to get away from Ed. She took a boat to an island and stayed there. To write and to think, but mostly to do these things away from Ed.

Anna never returned. Ed believed Anna must have been captured, kidnapped, killed. Death was the final note of their romance. Anna was Ed's greatest muse.

Anna is now quite happy on the island. She bought a house, not a sepulcher, as Ed's poems tell it. She fishes. She writes. She does not think about Ed.

A Fiendish Strumpet Among Honorable Men

*Woodland witchery,
Sexual butchery.
Men go in with suits and ties,
Wrap themselves within my thighs;
Each one emerges a new breed—of beast.
The quicker they climax, the quicker I feast.*

handful of dust. And even as she turned to the campground, and the woman receded into a latent mirage, could she feel the pull of that faintly-drawn figure.

The women were gathering now.

Elaine took a seat on the edge of one of the benches. The phantom woman did not join them, nor as she scanned those in attendance, could Elaine identify a distinct R.E. Wolf candidate (though, of course, she did not know what she was looking for).

The tall woman stood and spoke:

“I'd like to welcome you all to the first meeting of the Society of Sister Solitaires. My name is Bertha Wolf and I am a hermit and a managing editor of *Misanthropic Monthly*.”

Elaine's interest was piqued at the mention of Bertha's last name. But, it quickly tapered when it became clear this was one of those call-to-action addresses on some broad, socio-political issue.

Raven the Sharpshooter

Raven was locked in a room from the time she was a small girl. She was crazy they said. She stole candy. She bit other children. She disobeyed her mother. She kept kitchen knives in her room and shot small animals from the window.

But not one asked her about alcoholism and things that should be kept from people who are sick in that way. And the pride that must be preserved. And the hunger sated.

When her mother died, Raven stayed in that room for the rest of her life and developed the best shot in the county. Every day, with her father's old rifle, Raven would lean out the attic window and shoot bears and moose and birds and squirrels and creatures even so small as beetles.

And people would come from miles around to watch that crazy old madwoman shoot from a third-story window. Trusting completely that those shots would never go awry. What a fucking hoot it all was.

Elaine settled in to wait out the speech, which largely, and rather dryly, dealt with the social challenges to women obtaining both solitude and silence in everyday life, of impediments to retreating to autonomous, secluded lives and the inaccurate representations that often resulted in images of madwomen in caves, malevolent sorceresses and other demonic aberrations. And then, there was something or other about how male hermits have it easy and often garner more respect as reclusive woodsmen. In summation, this was a monthly meeting to share their experiences, strengthen their resolve and most importantly, their legitimacy as modern female hermits.

And so they would make their way around the circle, sharing what Bertha called their “Into the Woods” stories—narratives that identified the life

event that drove them to a life of isolation. Everyone in attendance was given a pen and paper and was to write them down and share them in the next hour.

When the speech was finished, Elaine wanted to speak with Bertha, but the tall woman hurried off to some task in the cabin, requesting, *please do not disturb*, when Elaine came knocking.

Irritated, Elaine figured she might as well set herself to the task of writing as the others were. She supposed she'd take a short walk and find a place to sit alone. After a period of walking, she came to a small hut by a river's edge. It was solid and small, constructed with sweet-smelling pine. Its only features were a single window and a front door, which faced eastward.

Elaine sat on the rocks by the rustic little hut. It was quiet and shaded. She drew out the pad and paper from her pack and set to writing her story, addressing it to R.E.

Elaine, a Near-Nazerene

I write this story to Ms. R.E. Wolf, who has been my constant guide during my years in exile.

I grew up in a wealthy Catholic household, which essentially means my life up until the age of 18 looked like one of those J. Crew catalogs where white men and women walk along a beach barefoot, wearing capris and knit sweaters in 80 degree weather. I was an only child with parents who loyally committed themselves to the sacrament of marriage. My mother served dinner to my father like Ina Garten to Jeffrey. Two people you couldn't ever imagine having sex. It was not a home without love, but it emphasized appropriate distance from less virtuous earth-bound relationships. Intimacy was with God.

I went to Catholic school, I was admirably devout. Upon graduation from high school, I planned to join a convent. My parents were proud. I was proud, because they were proud. Where there is guilt there is pride.

I wanted to join the Carmelite Sisters of Our Lady of Nazareth Church. I was drawn to their practice in "contemplative prayer," a silent retreat into faith. Among ideas like chastity and virtuousness and charity, I was particularly impressed by their reportedly high "rate of religious visions." It seemed to be the right fit for me.

But I suppose it was all those neglected stories, whispered tales told when no one was looking, or perhaps were never told at all, that caused me to question—and later reject—my faith.

One day, I was in confession. I confessed an erotic dream I'd had, terribly ashamed and crying for forgiveness.

And then, he might have, or at least I thought he might have, or could have, brushed the top of my knee. I'm not sure, but it was not the certainty of the event that mattered. It was the confusion I felt inside, at a body with urges, vulnerable to the urges of (supposedly virtuous) others, that I could not control, transcend, or eradicate.

Knowing I would never join the church with whole-hearted devotion, I cloistered myself elsewhere. I fled from responsibility, family and faith in a fair and nurturing God who gave His children ugly, ignorant, animal bodies to live in.

Wolf.

The Giantess

I have traveled every inch of the Appalachian Trail many times, leaving great craters in the earth in my wake, which grows more rugged with each passing.

My footprints started out quite small, though. Little old woman's feet. Like a bird's. At one time I was fragile and unsteady.

In my formative years I had many chicks. I raised them in a cramped little nest all on my own. They grew up strong and I was proud. But my life had been tough and it wore on my joints. I was bent and tired.

So one clear morning, I gathered what I needed into a small pack and left the nest. I found a trail and started walking.

I spent a lot of time with all kinds of trees. They were my community. I walked among them and learned from them. I learned to draw strength from my roots. I steadied. With each step my back strengthened and lengthened and thickened.

One day, I was ready to put down roots again and so I came here. To this day, I am much stronger and wiser for my many solitary adventures.

When Elaine finished writing, she was not eager to return to the campground and thought she might look around a bit. She approached the cabin, unsure of whether it was currently housing some foreign inhabitant or was momentarily empty. She cupped her hands to look into the window—peering into the interior she caught a bit of wallpaper and a small oval mirror, reflecting a bed. No one seemed to be home and it was pretty uninteresting. She wasn't entirely sure what she thought she might find.

"What do you think you're doing?" A voice—barely audible, as if it came in on the wind—approached Elaine from behind, "Get away from here!" The slight, lichen-like

figure raised a thin, but pointed stick at Elaine, which would have been laughably archaic, if she were not so savage-looking and full of hate. She meant harm. Though weight was on her side, Elaine had no weapon herself.

"I—I was just walking and ran into your home" Elaine took a few small steps back: "I didn't mean any harm" The woman advanced with the stick as if to prod her with it, to shoo her away like a common animal.

"You were trying to steal it weren't you?"

“Steal what? I don’t know what you’re talking about”

“Empty your pack.”

“I didn’t take anything.”

“Empty it.” The savage-looking girl advanced with the stick in warning.

Elaine spilled the contents of her bag on the grass—a pad of paper, a pen, the August issue of *Misanthropic Monthly*, an extra turtleneck, a tooth brush, a razor, and a wallet spilled out. Satisfied by the uncompromising contents, she allowed Elaine to gather up her things.

“Go, now,” said the young woman.

“In Northeastern society there is debate about the true nature of reclusive folk. Are they fundamentally selfish or selfless? Those who argue the former, claim that the hermit, to whom the community had given of itself in order to raise the child into human adulthood, is in fact guilty of theft after abandoning their families. Those who would make the latter case, however, believe the hermit’s refusal to participate in an unjust system is fundamentally noble and by extension redeeming to the human race.”

**--The Book of New England
Hermit Lore (4th ed.)**

Elaine left. She was all nerve endings. They buzzed under her skin all the way back to the campground, where everyone was convening. Self-reflective writing time was over and the women were preparing for the “sharing” portion of the meeting—a round of “Hi my name is ___ and I’m a hermit living in [insert obscure dwelling—shack, hovel, cave, cabin, run-down studio apartment] and this is how I made my escape from an unsympathetic world.” These were women were either scary or sad.

There was still no indication of who—if anyone—was Wolf. Elaine intercepted Bertha the second she emerged from the cabin.

“Excuse me, do you know if R.E. Wolf is here?”

“Wolf? No. She doesn’t come to these kinds of things. Keeps to herself.”

“Do you know where she lives? I need to talk to her.”

“I’m sorry dear I can’t help you. She’s a very private person.”

“But you’re related aren’t you?”

Ignoring the question, Bertha lifted the kettle she was holding, “Come, have some more tea and share what you’ve written.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t come here for this. I just need to find Wolf. Could you tell me where she is?”

“I already told you I can’t and I won’t.” And with that, the tall woman walked away.

Elaine left the clearing, her pace quickening as pressure began to build up behind her eyes. She’d come up empty handed and there was nothing more she could do. She shouldn’t have come. And now she didn’t know where to go. When she was clear of the campground, Elaine took a seat with her back against a large pine tree to collect herself.

She was there for only a few minutes, when a “psst” came from behind.

It was the scary lichen-girl standing at her shoulder. Elaine jumped up, startled, defensive. The young woman hushed her and simply said, “Follow me.”

“Why would I follow you? You just tried to kill me.” Elaine backed away cautiously.

She took a step toward her and produced a small piece of paper. It was the note Elaine had written. “How’d you get this?” Elaine was shocked and angry, but mostly embarrassed.

“You dropped it earlier—by my cabin.”

“And you thought it was okay to open this and read it?”

“Well, it was addressed to me.”

“To you? You’re R.E. Wolf?”

“Call me Rose.”

“But you—how is that possible?”

“How is it not?”

There was that gravity thing again.

Rose brought Elaine back to her home, which turned out to be one room. Inside, it was all very strange. The place was arranged in a configuration nearly the same as her apartment. Bed to the right of the door, kitchen to the left, a small living room space in front of the kitchen counter. A single window. It was all there, except for the addition of the flowery wallpaper, yellowed and fading in the late afternoon light, on one wall, to the right of the bed when you walked in the door. And there were far more objects in this room than there were in Elaine’s—a small, gold-framed mirror, knit blankets and rugs, various carved, wooden figurines, baskets with gathered blueberries and nuts and wild mushrooms and onions. There were kerosene lamps. And a woodstove. And everything smelled of pine. It was exceptionally quiet here, too. Birds and the soft trickling of the river.

“It’s beautiful,” said Elaine. Rose did not acknowledge the compliment, but instead, went to retrieve a folded slip of paper from a small wooden box. She handed it Elaine, “I read yours. It’s only fair that you read mine.”

Rose Evelyn Wolf

I was born in the Northern Woods to a woman who grew to be the tallest woman in the county. Though when I was young, she was a very tiny woman. Of seven children, I was her youngest. She raised them alone in a one room cabin. I have never met my father. One by one, her brood married off, until I was last.

I was betrothed to a man in town, but secretly I'd fallen deeply in love with his sister. We would meet at night and hold one another until just before dawn. But one day, he found me in her bed and everything fell apart. He called off the engagement, and took her away from me, saying that he was going to find her a suitable man down south. Before they left, I stole the wedding dress she was to get married in when the time came and I ran away. I found an abandoned camp and stayed here. He sent me letter after letter saying he knew I'd stolen the dress and would one day get it back from me. But that time never came. Not a word was ever spoken of this in town.

So I settled here and have been here ever since.

"Was it the dress?" asked Elaine.

"Hm?" Rose was busying herself about the kitchen, adding a little of this and that to a heavy, black pot sitting on the wood stove.

"The wedding dress. You thought I was going to steal it."

"Yes."

"Why? Why does it mean so much to him?"

"He believes I cursed it, because his sister never married."

"That's ridiculous."

"It is."

"Why not just give it back then, if it's so much trouble?"

"Give it back?" She said. The pale woman flushed red, the black pot seemed to boil more fiercely, "Give it back when it's rightfully *mine*?" Elaine did not respond. "If we'd have married she would have worn it to *our* wedding!"

Interviewer: "what does it mean to go 'woods-queer'?"

Stan Stevenson: "For folks who don't know, going woods-queer is a lot like 'cabin fever.' It's when you're alone in the woods for a long period of time and get a bit queer in the head from all the isolation."

Interviewer: "If it's about isolation, can you go woods-queer in a city?"

Stan Stevenson: "Well, I suppose you could. There're all types of woods in the world I suspect—plenty wild to hide away in."

**--Piscataquis Observer,
"Backwoods Odds and Ends"**

As the rage came, it went. Rose took a deep breath, the color in her cheeks drained, back to a pale, nearly greenish hue.

And so they ate, and Elaine was, for the first time in a long time, ravenous. Bowl after bowl after bowl. And Elaine talked more than she'd had in years, possibly ever. She spoke of her many fears—of shame and of friction and of God. Years of hiding and deprivation. She told the story about the old woman on the street. How she felt she could belong to someone and then had left her behind.

Let her go out of fear. Let her die.

"Are you afraid right now?" asked Rose, leaning forward.

"No." Elaine was not lying.

Rose took Elaine's hand in hers, let them rest there for a moment. The room was incredibly warm. Elaine's palms were sweaty. She did not care to notice.

"You could belong here," offered Rose. She pressed their entangled hands to her heart. She was all a-flower. Lilywhite skin, with only the slightest tinge of green, a thin stem of a figure draped in dewy, silk cobwebs, rose-red lips, wild hair like a cloud of pollen. Elaine could not resist. The fragrance was overwhelming. She leaned forward and touched her tongue to one petal-cheek. And then, all that followed was gravity that met with friction.

In the morning Elaine woke to find that Rose was gone. She searched frenetically within the cabin and around it, looking for any sign of her whereabouts. And then she went down to the river. And she found that sign. By the rocks, was a discarded dress under a tree, with a flower wreath hanging from one of its branches, and a carved message on its trunk. And it was all very clear what had happened, but perhaps not why.

“Mourn the solitary flower, for she was in the most pain.” –R.E.W

Elaine couldn't think of what to do so she went to the only place she could think of—to the campground, where all the women must still be. But when she got there, it was deserted. Everyone must have gone home. She nearly leaped over all the porch stairs to Bertha's cabin, knocking desperately at the door.

The tall old woman opened the door, looking down at Elaine sternly. It was very early.

“Elaine? What are you doing here?”

“Rose is dead. She drowned I think. Killed herself. You have to come help me. Please.” She was breathing heavily, “Everything seemed fine last night and then—and then—I wake up and she's gone and I don't—I don't—know what to do you have to help me.” Elaine could barely manage the words.

“What are you talking about?”

“Rose Wolf. I just told you. She killed herself.”

“Rose? Rose drowned twenty years ago.”

“What no, no she didn't. she was just here with us yesterday.”

“Us?”

“All the women—the hermits. They met right here. Rose was there. And so were you.” The woman shook her head again, brow wrinkled in concern.

“How about you come in. I’ll make us some tea.”

The tall woman sat her down in a fraying armchair and explained things slowly and calmly, systematically, as if she’d been through it before. It went something like this:

Rose was my daughter. She was always troubled and sad. And when that man left her, she was beside herself. Rose tied weights to her body. Rose drowned in her wedding dress. Rose found a better place. *And you, Elaine*, said the woman. We’ve been over this. You came here months ago. You looked tired, thin. You needed a place to live. I

offered to sell you the cabin by the river. I gave you the keys. We check in on you now and then. Other than that, you keep to yourself. You seem to live elsewhere most of the time.

Elaine was “elsewhere.” None of this was real, except the tea that was hot, the mug that grounded her and the fingers that felt slick as she held it. She listened and left. Maybe saying “thank you” as she stepped out of the cabin.

She headed back toward the river, following the trail. On her left the river peeked into view here and there between the trees. Then she caught something white behind the branches, almost like a swan she thought at first, gliding by on the water. She went for a

“Supernatural encounters are not uncommon among New England hermits. Indeed, hermits are in a particularly advantaged metaphysical position to be open such otherworldly exchanges. The Hermit Maxim, for example, often boasted of his nighttime apprenticeship with the ghost of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Whether Maxim’s poetry ever showed improvement to that effect is, as of yet, controversial.”

**--The Book of New England
Hermit Lore**

closer look. It wasn't a swan, but a dress. There was no one in it, but it was splayed out, as if just vacated. She followed it down the river to get a closer look. There was something about it. Familiar. She swam out to retrieve it. Upon grasping its fabric, she knew whose it was.

"Did you hear the one about that girl who rode a moose?"

"How about that man who froze one winter and thawed out good as new in the Spring?"

"What about that old woman who had powers of witchery? I heard she poisoned people with toad's milk."

**--Piscataquis Observer,
"Backwoods Odds and Ends"**

Elaine croaked with excitement and surprised herself when she hopped easily up onto its skirt. She was delighted to find that she was not too heavy to stay afloat on the dress, and it turned out to be quite comfortable, so she settled in. She thought one could easily mistake the vessel for a lily—the fabric like white, velvety petals, the tied bows like rose-red anthers and the sash like a long green stem. But she supposed things could be at once two things sometimes. Just as a witchy cackle could also be the wind, which whistled, snickered and blew at her back.

Elaine rode the lily down the river, content to go where it took her. She belonged to her newfound body. She belonged to the lily flower and the mysterious gravity that kept them together. Here, far from the world of men, there was freedom.

The Sun moves closer, expanding. A hot wind pulls my hair back. I know that soon I will be incinerated. I wonder if it hurts to feel particles leave your body when the Sun is a star and you are stardust? Wouldn't it be more like homecoming?

I lift my right arm. Palm turned upward in a gesture of submission. I feel the very tips of my fingers singed by the celestial flame. It's not so bad as I imagined it. The fire spreads

down the length of my fingers, and I watch as the particles are released and float upward—a million tiny paper lanterns carried skyward by microscopic flames.

3. THE HERMIT AS FOLK HERO

Some years had passed before again
My footsteps chanced to stray,
By the cascade grand is the little glen
Where lived the hermit gray.
The hut was vacant, but 'neath the shade
Of the old oak tree a grave was made.

“At peace at last, rest undisturbed.”
I murmured in accents low:
The oak leaves rustled as if they heard.
Perhaps it indeed was so.
And I dropped, in Humanity's behalf,
A tear on the hermit's epitaph.

--Fred E. Irish, “The Hermit”

Braddock & Barrett: In the Society of Trees

In the early years of our nation's founding, back when families were just starting to settle the vast backcountry lands up north, two hermits in the untouched wilds of Maine were faced with the approach of civilization.

One was named Braddock. He'd arrived first—some say around 1784, but it could have been even earlier than that—and made his home in the pine forests, on land that would one day become Searsmont.⁶³ There he lived by a pond on a tiny island all to himself. Braddock had miles of open land for hunting and he often roamed it as a nomadic trapper, following animals of all sorts for weeks at a time. But as more and more territory was taken up by newcomers, Braddock had less land to hunt on. There were too many people hunting alongside him, game was less plentiful, and besides, he was getting older. He was not sure he could live independent of the nearby town much longer.

And so although he preferred “the society of his own feelings” to the society of men, Braddock could be seen in the early Montville settlement—back when it was still called Davistown—from time to time accepting bread from the townspeople, who noted his habit of bowing “with great reverence” over every crumb as odd and a bit funny.⁶⁴

Despite his stern set expression, children in town were always excited when Braddock appeared. He dressed in a “hairy costume,” of furs, with a long beard and white locks that got caught up in gusts of wind, which reminded them perhaps of a holy

⁶³ Cyrus Eaton, *Annals of Warren* (Hallowell: Masters & Livermore, 1877), 221.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

man in the desert or primordial cave-dweller.⁶⁵ Everyone thought of Braddock as a “singular character,” with colorful stories. In one story, Braddock was tending his fire and a giant, ancient-looking tortoise emerged from the flames. Braddock, who took it as a good omen, ate the whole, roasted tortoise right there—a “delicious repast” for the hungry hermit.⁶⁶

When Braddock died, the people in town buried him on his island—a final resting place known only to few. The secret of the hermit’s retreat into the woods was never revealed. All trace of the reason, we must assume, was buried with him—a personal item born of his own society, forever kept far from the world of men.

The other hermit was Timothy Barrett. He came ten years later, to the same region, and chose a cave on Hogback Mountain for his home. The hermit found companionship in a dog and a tame otter, and lived comfortably among “wild beasts, rocks, ...trees and birds.”⁶⁷ Barrett was known to be intelligent and resourceful. He engineered an oven out of a hollow tree stump and spent much of his time copying the Bible onto pieces of bark. Soon, though, “advancing industry,” encroached upon Barrett’s solitude and he was faced with navigating a rapidly populating area.

Seeking isolation, Barrett decided to move to True’s Mill Pond, where he built himself a teepee-like dwelling in a grove of wild apple trees and planted a floating garden. Barrett spent the rest of his days sleeping in a verdant “nest” in his teepee wearing a turban-like head piece of white cloth material, and walking around his

⁶⁵ Cyrus Eaton referred to the hermit as a “Leatherstocking” of the wilderness, which refers to a character in James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*, a set of books that tell the story of a remarkable American frontiersman.

⁶⁶ Mike Beaudry, “The Eccentric Hermit of Davistown.” *Davistown Museum*. Accessed in 2016. <http://www.davistownmuseum.org/TDMeccentricHermits.html>

⁶⁷ Cyrus, *Annals of Warren*, 222.

*campsite barefoot.*⁶⁸ *Passersby looked on the “poor old hermit” in his “decidedly primitive” circumstances with pity. The lonely old man, some said, was woefully misguided in his rejection of human society and the “sweets of social life.” Supposedly, Barrett had allied himself with the wild beasts, out of some “unhappy circumstance,” but the cause of his unhappy heart was never known, and perhaps never was.*

Outlaws and Oddities: The Pine Tree State from the Peripheral(2016)

1: “What is a Character?”

‘Character’ is a term that gets a lot of mileage in Maine. Maybe it’s the remoteness of the place or something in the air up there, but Maine’s rural regions boast a colorful assortment of local ‘characters,’ of all shapes, sizes, and peculiarities.

Statements like, “Well, he/she was a character, alright,” are frequent and varied in observational application. Glenn Poole, longtime resident of Monson, ME, describes a character as someone who is “very different...unusual” with a “warped sense of humor.” Others in town agreed, indicating “uniqueness” as the defining quality of a character.

Maine folklorist Sandy Ives puts folk characters on the far end of a continuum of folk heroes. He argues that while groups of people look up to folk heroes, they “feel comfortably superior” to folk characters, who are, in a variety of eccentric cases, worthy of attention for being exceptionally strange or funny and, in some instances, abhorrently unhygienic.* As you might guess, this can have numerous behavioral implications(See: Chapter 3: The Pitiful and the Profane).

*Edward D. Ives, *George Magoon and the Downeast Game Wars* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 8.

In their time, Braddock and Barrett were regarded more with pity and amusement than reverence. Passersby saw in them strange mannerisms and comical habits, as well as loneliness, destitution and deep veins of melancholy.⁶⁹ These were not heroes, but disenfranchised loners living in the society of trees. And so were more like characters—anomalous, yet benign. They colored the local, but did not represent the broader interests of its inhabitants. They were not, in their earliest iteration, folk heroes as Ives might define them.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Three accounts form the basis of this observation. One is of a man named Mr. Barrett, who is, oddly enough, discussing his encounter with Timothy Barrett (“The Hermit of Montville,” *Maine Farmer*, Mar. 5, 1849). The second is a piece in the *Rockland Opinion* concerning a visit with Timothy Barrett “decidedly primitive” dwelling (Beaudry, “The Eccentric Hermit of Davistown”). The third is a historical account in the *Annals of Warren*, published later, in 1877 with a slightly more forgiving description of Braddock, though he is looked on with some pity, concerning his “grotesque” appearance (Beaudry).

This was during the “post-Revolutionary War land rush,” a heyday of homesteading in Maine when, “the wealth of timber resources and the hope for free land,” brought large waves of settlers into the state’s northwestern regions, eager to work the land and lay a rightful claim to it.⁷⁰ This was a time of community-oriented hard work—clearing land, planting gardens, raising barns—and putting down roots that dug deep and would grow for generations to come. Yet, reclusive, and oftentimes nomadic, woodsmen like Braddock and Barrett, who in their respective regions pre-dated pioneering families, did not actively take part in this project.

As was pointed out to me by a Maine resident during a drive through Monson (a “hermit hotspot” seventy miles north of Montville⁷¹), hermits, while they made a living in the woods, were not homesteaders. To be a homesteader means that one seeks to *claim* the land, to rightfully own it by working hard on it, to live independently by its fruits, to hold one’s own, but to also assist and accept help from one’s neighbors. Homesteading is not an individual project, but a communal one that seeks self-sufficiency in a remote area, but not isolation from social life.

In fact, the large waves of homesteaders coming into Maine in the late 18th century were taking part in a larger social movement of revolutionaries, common people seeking to exercise their freedom in a newly liberated country. In this sense then, homesteading was an expression of a post-colonial, and heavily agrarian, American identity, which according to historian Alan Taylor, stood in contrast to “elite ways of

⁷⁰ H.G. Brack “History of the Davistown Plantation (Volume 2),” *Davistown Museum*. April 11, 2016.

<http://www.davistownmuseum.org/publications/volume2.html#HistContext>.

⁷¹ As it was described to me by a passing visitor in the Patten Lumberman Museum.

defining the Revolution.”⁷² He describes post-Revolution settlers in Maine as, "Wild Yankees, Anti-Renters, Whiskey Rebels, Regulators, and Liberty Men [who] believed in a different American Revolution, one meant to protect small producers from the moneyed men who did not live by their own labor, but instead, preyed on the many who did."⁷³ These “moneyed men” were known as the Great Proprietors—men who, under Charles I, were granted large tracts of land and following the revolution were, apparently, highly persuasive in their arguments to Congress concerning their capitalist interests and rightful ownership over land, which should not be, in a literal economic sense, *free*. Hence, the emphasis on the homesteader *claim* to land and the political implications of putting forward that claim.

While Barrett and Braddock bear some of that pioneering vigor and spirit for rebellion in that both are staunchly independent wild men living outside of, and subsequently in opposition to, the law, they are not described as politically motivated, but as suffering some individual trauma that severed their ties to society. It is unclear where they came from and why they went into the woods, information which would be strategically useful for anyone with revolutionary interests. Furthermore, they are semi-nomadic, highly adept at navigating the landscape, but not bent on leaving their mark upon it, and obviously neither are particularly excited about newcomers in the neighborhood. Essentially, these men do not offer their allegiance to the “society of men”

⁷² Alan Taylor *Liberty Men and the Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820*(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 9-10.

⁷³ Taylor, *Liberty Men and great proprietors*, 6.

but to that of “wild beasts,...rocks, trees and birds.”⁷⁴ They are effectively citizens of a different society altogether.

When Henry David Thoreau toured the Maine woods in the mid-19th century, he observed in its towns model American citizens whom he defined as “forest-citizens”—the “fruit” of, “both Maine’s political and natural resources—of both Maine and its woods.”⁷⁵ The forest-citizen is the product of both a community’s social structures and the forested features of its environment—a rugged landscape, harsh winters, densely wooded surroundings that require a certain kind of human response. That characteristic response shapes the broadly defined Mainer, which Thoreau interprets as emphasizing a strong work ethic, self-sufficiency, ruggedness, resourcefulness and intelligence.

However, while pioneers were participating citizens, because they “came into the forest...to build homes,” hermits were frontier nomads, restless “adventurers,” going boldly into the wild alone with no perceived communal interests.⁷⁶ Men like Braddock and Barrett were squatting on the land, borrowing it for a term without seeking to improve it or connect it to a larger social network. Such hermits are thus in some sense, without a defined practical function, living outside a network of homesteaders, likely understood as marginal entertainments for their social idiosyncrasies, or charitable beneficiaries for their perceived “decidedly primitive” circumstances.

Braddock and Barrett are understood similarly to Monson hermit Ralph Perkins, who “walked through the woods...found a place he liked and built a camp” and then did

⁷⁴ “The Hermit of Montville,” *Maine Farmer*, Mar. 15, 1849.

⁷⁵ Burke, *Maine’s Place in the Environmental Imagination*, 51.

⁷⁶ William Knowlton, *Centennial poems and directory of Monson, Maine* (Lewiston: Journal Printshop and Bindery, 1922), 15.

his best to alter his course home so as not to create a footpath to his dwelling.⁷⁷ A hermit, by definition, does not invite civilization to join him, and so requires the persistence of the wild to maintain a remote dwelling. Thus, while the hermit possesses some of the pioneering vigor of a forest-citizen, he is foremost a *citizen of the forest*, answering to the forest and not to human society.

Nearly one-hundred years later a writer from Missouri came to Maine and wrote a novel about the early settlers around Searsmont and Montville. He found the stories of Braddock and Barrett in old histories written on those early settlements, and saw in them unrecognized heroism. Taking the tales of Braddock and Barrett, and selecting from each their most charming qualities, he created a hermit hybrid—a hero who called himself, “I’m Davis.”

Ben Ames Williams’ *Come Spring* is a fictional re-imagining of the founding families of Unity, a town in Midcoast Maine, during the Revolutionary War.⁷⁸ The narrative follows the experiences of a young woman named Mima, a member of the Robbins family, as she learns what it means to live in an unforgiving, at times outright hostile, natural environment. “I’m Davis,” the novel’s hermit hero, emerges as a bread-worshipping wild man with curly white locks, a suit of animal skins, and exceptional hunting and navigational skills. He is known to sleep in a nest of his own making and periodically relocates further upriver to keep his distance from encroaching civilization.

⁷⁷ Robert Robertson, in-person interview, July 20, 2015.

⁷⁸ Ben Ames Williams, *Come Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940).

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3. "Near-Heroes"

Man-Beasts

With surprising frequency, reclusive characters in Maine are compared to various woodland mammals of assorted sizes and significances. Such associations seem to arise from close quarters, physical resemblance, gestural similarity, and in some cases, a distinct, comparable odor, to local fauna.

Monson's Ralph Perkins, for example, often seemed scary and bearlike to those confronted by him. As Monson resident, Bob Roberts tells it, one night Ralph went into the woods to rescue a lost hunter and when hermit and hunter came face-to-face, Bob says, "Ralph was whiskered and dirty and ya know just like an animal coming through the woods almost. And the guy said, 'Good God,' he said, 'I'd rather stayed there than meet him again.'"*

*Robert Robertson, in-person interview, July 20, 2015.

In the novel, Mima is baking bread outdoors one day when a man emerges apparition-like from the woods. The encounter is at first strange and unsettling, for the man appears near-indistinguishable from that of a forest-dwelling animal accustomed to dark groves and damp forest cover:

"A man dressed in skins, white beard flowing, long locks about his shoulders, bowing profoundly. [Mima] uttered a low exclamation...He was tremendously tall.

His cap was of moose hide shaped to his head and sewed with sinews. His hunting shirt was made of moose hide, too...this skirt descended to his knees.

Below bearskin leggings frayed by brush and brambles, his feet were bare and black and horny...not like theirs. His were more like hooves than feet, they

were so calloused and so dark."⁷⁹

The ambiguously moose-like man introduces himself, in a voice "creaky from disuse," as "I'm Davis,"⁸⁰ and asks if he might have some of their bread—a rare human luxury, for in the forest he eats only moose and bear meat.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Williams, 241-2.

⁸⁰ The hermit is consistently referred to as "I'm Davis" throughout the novel. Whether the addition of "I'm" is a product of some social tick, or is there to place a singular presence to an otherwise generic name, is unclear and never commented on in the text.

⁸¹ Williams, *Come Spring*, 242.

Mima inquires about his origins. Where does this man-beast hybrid live? I'm Davis's response is opaque and abstract, "I live wherever I be...I'm here ain't I? I'm alive ain't I? Well then, right now, I live here."⁸² I'm Davis seems to covet his invisibility and isolation, even saying to Mima, "Don't you crowd me!" The presence of settlers is a clear source of anxiety for the reclusive woodsman.⁸³

Yet, it is this same enigmatic quality about the man, which draws Mima closer and fuels her interest in visiting the hermit's home, resting in a supposed northern paradise upriver, teeming with moose, duck, and bear—a dwelling, which turns out to be a den nestled between large boulders, that he refers to as only, "a place I go back to."⁸⁴ I'm Davis represents a restless spirit emblematic of Mima's own youthful yearning to explore foreign physical and interpersonal spaces. He is, in part, a product of her own self-reflection—a manifestation of both her desires and fears in a vigorously alive, yet so often "impersonal and pitiless" environment. I'm Davis's stories—tales of pristine landscapes, amusing social encounters, and horrific confrontations with the wild—act as a guiding force at the periphery of Mima's experiences in the Maine woods. Mima calls upon her memories of I'm Davis often as a way to make sense of and glean wisdom from her experiences. He is, in effect, a powerful navigational aide for Mima, a stable point in the distance, helping her to find a quiet haven on the frontier.

⁸² Williams, 243.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 358.

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3. "The Pitiful and the Profane"

Revisiting Tragedy

Gravestones function as objects of reflection. Passersby will often stop at the headstones of local hermits to meditate on the tragic lives and miserable deaths of such solitary souls.

I offer a few obituaries for your consideration:

Bill Dobson: The Crazy Hermit of Spencer—His Appearance a Surprise, His Life Strange and His Departure Pathetic:

"Bill Dobson, the crazy hermit of Spencer mountains (sic), is dead. In a miserable log cabin on the wild mountain side far away from human aid and comfort, surrounded by the sighing pines, the drifting snow and roaming beasts, this strange man breathed his last."*

The Old Man of the Mountain: A Truth Stranger than Fiction:

"I could find no trace of him in the vicinity of the mountains,--no memento of his life or his tomb. He had gone or died, no one knew where, when, or how, and his name was gradually fading from thememory of those who in their younger days beheld him as a visitor from the 'Spectre Land.'**"

*"Bill Dobson is Dead." *Lewiston Daily Sun*. Feb. 9, 1898.

**B., J. M. "The Old Man of the Mountain." *Maine Farmer*. Jun. 3, 1847.

"She was conscious of unbroken forest stretching for long mile on mile to the north and to the west.

To the south and to the east there were town

enough; but to the north there was nothing, and no dwellers except such solitary folk as old I'm

Davis."⁸⁵

I'm Davis serves as a mentor from a distance. His

heroic value is recognized in retrospect, when

removed both spatially and temporally from current circumstances.

Fifty years before Ben Ames Williams'

Come Spring was published with its hermit hero,

comprised of all of Braddock and Barrett's most

dramatically useful characteristics, Cora Buzzell

Millay detailed a drive she took through Waldo

County in an 1890 article for the *Maine Farmer*. In

the near-idyllic landscape she described, Millay

happened upon a pond among the rolling hills and

meandering rivers of Searsmont, and reflected on

its tiny island, which she reported, "must be the

⁸⁵ Williams, *Come Spring*, 359.

grave [site] of the hermit named Braddock.”⁸⁶ What fragments she had heard of the hermit’s curious life give her pause. She does some research on the matter and discovers a footnote in George Varney’s 1881 *A Gazetteer of the State of Maine*, which points to an interview with a well-known “pioneer and singular character” of Searsmont, known as Uncle Joe Meservey, in an unidentified newspaper, concerning the man’s “earlier recollections” of the once-wild land. First among those recollections representative of the untouched forest, before Searsmont Village ever existed, was his acquaintance with Braddock, a man living in a solitary camp by the pond. In an editorial aside, Uncle Joe’s interviewer comments, “How many romances have had a less romantic foundation than these simple circumstances.” The *Gazetteer* footnote furthermore mentions that “Mr. Braddock was not Searsmont’s only hermit,” briefly citing Timothy Barrett as a similarly notable figure in the region.⁸⁷ For Millay, Varney, and Uncle Joe Meservey, these hermits are not complexly real people, but objects of nostalgia.

⁸⁶ Cora Buzzell Millay, “Bits of Waldo County,” *Maine Farmer*, Sep. 18, 1890.

⁸⁷ George J. Varney, *A Gazetteer of the State of Maine* (Boston: B.B. Russell, 1881), 504.

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2. "Near-Heroes"

Deliverers

As hermits are well acquainted with navigating the wild, there are numerous recorded instances of woods-dwellers rescuing stray hikers and sportsmen, escaped prisoners, and even game wardens.

One story tells of a hermit named Spencer Pete, who was known to take axes to sportsmen's canoes. Once in a while, however, he would take pity on those poor souls who got lost near his camp and would lead them out of the woods and back home.*

Another tells of a nameless poacher in St. Zachary being pursued by game wardens. It was winter, and the clever recluse put his snowshoes on backwards to confuse his pursuers. He confused the wardens so thoroughly that they got lost in the woods, and the hermit had to turn back and help them find their way home.**

And the final instance we'll note here, is about a hermit with a 'prickly nature' named Bill Hall who "knew the woods like the back of his hand" and so helped law enforcement locate escaped German POWs in the northern Maine woods.***

*Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, Access #433, 13.

**Monson roundtable discussion, in-person, July 20, 2015.

*** Ron Joseph, "Escape from Spencer Lake," *Downeast Magazine*, December 2014.

Orin Klapp, in an ambitious survey of the of the folk hero as a global phenomenon, argues that the biographical facts of an individual-made-hero's life are vulnerable to decay just like any other memory, and so heroes, in the popular imagination, are given to cultural simplification, effectively to a "myth-making process." Thus, Klapp elaborates, "as historical personages become legendary, they are made into folk heroes by the interweaving and selection of mythical themes appropriate to their character as popularly conceived."⁸⁸ They effectively become touchstone types in public retellings. Braddock and Barrett thus represent landmarks to which we periodically return, a ritual turning-back across an ever-increasing distance, which keeps their memories alive while also enhancing the romance of their remoteness with each successive glance in retrospect.

Ben Ames Williams' fictional hermit hero, I'm Davis, is what Monson resident Glenn Poole might call "woods wise." He knows how to thrive in

⁸⁸ Orin Klapp, "The Folk Hero," *The Journal of American Folklore* 62, no. 243 (1949): 17.

the woods—to hunt, find shelter, travel in a dense forest without trails—all on his own. A remarkable feat in contemporary society, a present-day culture in which most people, as Poole says, “don’t know the woods too well.”⁸⁹ Monson’s historical hermits are thus impressive to its present-day residents for their exceptional woods skills and knowledge of the area,⁹⁰ as is I’m Davis to the Robbins family for his hunting expertise, strength and endurance,⁹¹ and secret knowledge of all the most plentiful moose yards.

I’m Davis shares tips on moose hunting with Mima’s husband, Joel, remarking, “They’re thick as flies up my way, no more trouble to kill than butchering neat cattle...you [just] have to have the know-how.”⁹² I’m Davis’s heroism comes from his proximity to a trying wilderness, the strength of his experience in those woods and the daily test of survival it necessitates. By simply surviving I’m Davis demonstrates an extraordinary vigor for life, an inspiring example of human will, which he, however unconsciously, conveys on those civilized folk he encounters.

Moreover, like many historical hermits, I’m Davis often uses his woods knowledge to the benefit of lost travelers, far from home, who are unable to navigate their unforeseen circumstances. I’m Davis helps deserters, who’ve “Quit the King,”⁹³ escape north, leads settlers to plentiful hunting grounds, and, given the speed and efficiency with which he travels in dense woods, often performs as a messenger of sorts between settlements with no roads and few trails.

⁸⁹ Glenn Poole, in-person interview, July 20, 2015

⁹⁰ Milton Anderson, Estella Bennett, Wayne Bennett, Glenn Poole, and Robert Robertson, in-person interview, July 20, 2015.

⁹¹ He can “walk a horse to death, any day” page 359.

⁹² Williams, *Come Spring*, 359.

⁹³ Williams, 291

Klapp defines the cultural hero as “an honored founder or contributor.”⁹⁴ Yet it is difficult to approximate I’m Davis as representative of a cultural hero. In some sense, he pre-dates the pioneer—men like Uncle Joe Meservey in Searsmont, and further north in Monson, Joseph Bearce, popularly understood to be the first settlers in an area—who are believed to be their heroic “originals.” Men like I’m Davis, living in the margins, seeking isolation over participation,⁹⁵ and thus not actively paving the way for human occupation in new territories, function more as an unseen guiding force, setting us right again when we fall down.

According to Klapp’s categories, this might place men like Braddock and Barrett—and subsequently I’m Davis’s fictional representation, amongst “Defenders or Deliverers.” These are heroes who “characteristically come to rescue a person or group from danger or distress.”⁹⁶ Such heroes are there when needed. They are care-givers, icons of salvation, around which people tend to gather. Hermit heroes like the fictionalized I’m Davis perform these roles quietly, while maintaining some sense of the frontier. They support civilization, delivering those who fall astray, and welcoming those seekers—like Mima—who, if only momentarily, need to step into the woods to learn something important about themselves.

⁹⁴ Klapp, “The Folk Hero,” 22.

⁹⁵ Which some might call selfish or lazy. See: David Boynton interview concerning Ray Phillips (Aug. 20, 2015) and Paul Elmer More, “A Hermit’s Notes on Thoreau,” *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1901.

⁹⁶ Klapp, “The Folk Hero,” 21.

North Pond's Phantom-Man

By the pond of a rural town in Maine there once lived a phantom-man locals called the North Pond Hermit. He was a clean-shaven, bespectacled fellow who enjoyed eating marshmallow fluff and peanut butter while thumbing through the latest issue of People magazine or listening to Lynyrd Skynyrd on the radio. For twenty-seven years he lived alone in the seclusion of a brown, tarp-covered camp, well hidden behind a ring of large stones and thick, leafy trees. Not once in all that time did he speak to another human being.

Though he lived in their backyard, the local people had never met the North Pond Hermit. They did not know his name or what he looked like. They only knew him from what he stole from their homes at night—frozen steaks, batteries, beer. To them, he was an elusive phantom, a ghost with personal tastes and interests, who by some accounts felt familiar, a being with the potential for pathos.

But then, he had this way of slipping snakelike in and out of kitchen windows. Noiseless. Print-less (Where were the boot tracks leading back into the woods? Did the man have feet?). It was perhaps the lack of a felt-presence that was most unsettling, unsympathetic, inhuman.

Until one day in April of 2013 when the security sensors in a disabled children's camp went off (for even apparitions cannot slip by modern surveillance undetected). That's when they finally trapped the flesh and blood man—a man, who they would come to learn, had a birth certificate and a history and a name in their own world.

It was 1:15 a.m. on Thursday, April 4th when the Pine Tree Camp's newly installed electronic sensors and cameras alerted Sgt. Terry Hughes and Trooper Diane Perkins-Vance to the North Pond Hermit's attempted raid on the disabled children's camp. They rushed to the scene, eager to catch the legendary thief. However, when they arrived they found a man they did not expect. He was neither the terrifying monster nor the destitute supplicant the locals had envisioned for nearly three decades, but tidy and well nourished, wearing new Land's End jeans and boots. The man, whose name they learned was Christopher Knight, was neither wild nor violent, but socially timid and wholly apologetic. Locals expressed a mixture of puzzlement, irritation, and awestruck curiosity. Was Christopher Knight, the famed North Pond Hermit, to be venerated for his quarter-of-a-century feat in the woods, or demonized for its essential lawlessness?

Rome residents took different positions. While some praised Knight's solitude, others condemned the banditry that maintained his lifestyle as immoral and, understandably, unsettling. In an interview with the *Kennebec Journal*, Carol Sullivan, a victim of Knight's annual thefts, describes the discomfort and fear she felt during the hermit's time at North Pond:

"28 years of looking over your shoulder while walking around your camp at night...feeling that you're being watched constantly, feeling violated from someone breaking into your camp and going through personal things, eventually questioning whether it's your neighbors who are guilty of these crimes."⁹⁷

Sullivan expresses worries about the destructive capacities of the hermit—what he is capable of doing to her, both physically and psychologically. She sees him as more than a

⁹⁷ Betty Adams, "North Pond victim fearful of 'hermit' returning to crime," *Kennebec Journal*, Mar 24, 2015.

mild irritation, but as a wild, unpredictable thief, lurking in dark corners, lying in wait, spreading fear and paranoia throughout the region. Those in agreement with Sullivan's stance associate Knight with such figures as anarchist "Unabomber," Ted Kaczynski, and the Phantom of the Opera, a more sympathetic, but equally disquieting, virtuoso recluse. Any compassion or admiration they might be tempted to feel toward Knight's circumstances, is overcome by what they perceive to be his disturbing invisibility and possible motives of ill-will. To them, he is foremost a troubling social deviant.

Others however, like Larry Stewart, a Rome resident who had known Knight briefly as a teenager, saw a compassionate character in the North Pond Hermit: "It's one of those stories," he said in a *Bangor Daily News* article, "It grabbed my interest, and now it's touched my heart. I really feel for the guy. It's like that Tom Hanks movie⁹⁸—when he comes back to civilization, what's he going to do after this?" Stewart sympathizes with Knight's forced re-entry into society after over a quarter of a century of wooded seclusion—circumstances, which he further describes as charmingly simple by comparison to the chaotic, and what he believes to be dangerous, modern experience. Concerning Knight's time in the woods Stewart says: "I read that he watched a mushroom grow for four years. That was his television. To him that was a normal day: I'm going to watch some mushrooms, watch eagles fly by, break into a camp and get some lunch meat." The observation appears driven by nostalgic sentiment—a call for simpler times when meditating on a shelf mushroom or an eagle would have held profound meaning and endless entertainment, and subsistence consisted of a bit of

⁹⁸ A lot of people seemed to make this connection. One meme shows a picture of a propane tank (one of the hermit's iconic stolen items) and reads: "WILSON Property of: the North Pond Hermit"

foraging in a nearby area. Stewart's conclusions on Knight's retreat into the woods are unsurprising: "Who am I to say he needs help? Is that too crazy, to want to go and leave society for that long?"⁹⁹ Stewart's assessment of Knight's decision to take to the woods hints at the presence of unconscious madness in society's own rationality, symptoms of which are apparent in their condemnation of marginal solitary souls such as Knight who simply seek to live quietly and modestly apart.

Stewart is in the camp of those that align Knight with well-known mythically drawn characters like Henry David Thoreau, Robinson Crusoe, Chris McCandless and Robin Hood. He perhaps sees a genuine expression of, possibly justifiable, social resistance at work in the North Pond Hermit's choice to leave a corrupt society for the solace of a forest-dwelling existence. In this respect, Knight is not troubling, but tragic and inspirational, as a deviant figure.

When Knight's arrest hit headlines it seemed that the hermit's tale really was *one of those stories*. It captured the sympathies and imaginations of people across the county who were fascinated by the psychology and near super-human strength required to survive three decades of isolation in the woods. As the *Portland Press Herald* put it, the North Pond Hermit was "more myth than man."¹⁰⁰ An instant celebrity. He was all over the news, memes of his mug shot circulated on the internet, a Facebook page tracked his

⁹⁹Abigail Curtis, "'North Pond Hermit'—a Son, a Brother, and a Classmate, but few knew Him Well." *Bangor Daily News*, Apr 11, 2013.

¹⁰⁰ Matt Hongoltz-Hetling, "Hermit joins other legends in folk song spotlight," *Centralmaine.com*, April 17, 2013.

emerging tale, and artists, both locally¹⁰¹ and internationally,¹⁰² were inspired to explore his story further in ballads and art installations.

In terms of American outlaw heroes, the circumstances of the North Pond Hermit are certainly strange, but not singular. Five years prior to the hermit's arrest, a popular west coast vigilante, Colton-Harris-Moore, a.k.a the Barefoot Bandit,¹⁰³ captured the nation's attention when he escaped from a juvenile detention center in Washington. For two years he evaded capture, out-maneuvering authorities all over the country at every turn, reportedly performing over one hundred burglaries—of which five were airplane heists—and surviving alone in the woods for weeks at a time. At one point, the confidently clever thief even began, “leaving both actual and hand-drawn footprints at crime scenes as a personal calling card,” as if acting the part of a comic strip character.¹⁰⁴ To many at home watching Harris-Moore dodge officials with ease, the Barefoot Bandit had that ingenious, near-invincible Marvel character quality. And so like the North Pond Hermit, in that same vein of extra-ordinary outlawry, he was wildly popular on internet discussion boards and the subject of numerous ballads on YouTube. There were even t-shirts made by his supporters, some of which read: “Free Colton,” “Fly, Colton, Fly!”

¹⁰¹ See: Stanley Keach's ballad, “We Don't Know the North Pond Hermit” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDd_0rvKj_s).

¹⁰² See: Scandinavian artist Jasper De Beijer's “Mr. Knight's World Band Receiver,” (<http://debeijer.com/2015/11/>) a series of 3D models built to capture subjective “reverse empiricism”—how Knight might have imagined the outside world to look with only textual material to go on during his time in the woods.

¹⁰³ The “Barefoot Bandit” moniker reportedly arose from a photograph of him traveling barefoot at one point.

¹⁰⁴ Casey Schmitt, “The Barefoot Bandit, Outlaw Legend, and Modern American Folk Heroism,” *Folklore*, 123, no. 1 (2012), 74.

Outlaws and Oddities: The Pine Tree State from the Peripheral (2016)

3. "The Pitiful & the Profane"

Bandits

Maine has a long history of irksome bandits—guys who decide to “borrow” your camp when you’re not home and leave a mess in their wake, who steal the skins you planned to sell in town, or pinch your farm tools and try to sell them back to you at a later date. Bandits are good fodder for stories, but pests when they come knocking on your door.

Here are a couple examples:

There was a man who lived in southern Maine that people called Apple John. He lived in an old piano box and was known to make the best cider around (some of which he sold, but most of which he drank). He would have been a welcome addition to the community if it wasn’t for the fact that he “slithered” up his neighbor’s apple trees at night and stole all the fruit he used to make that famous cider.*

Another notable bandit lived up around Monson years ago. For legal reasons, we cannot divulge his real name—so let’s just call him the Tobacco Bandit. The Tobacco Bandit was a real disruption to the Greenville railroad line. When a train was scheduled to come through, the Tobacco Bandit would set small explosives by the tracks so that the passing train would have to stop. While the train was stopped the bandit would climb and bum tobacco off of unsuspecting travelers.**

*Robert Tristram Coffin, “Apple John,” in *Maine Doings* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), 178-190.

**Monson roundtable, in-person, July 20, 2015.

and “Owned” stamped on the silhouette of a police officer. He was, as folklorist Casey Schmitt put it, “an honest-to-goodness American folk hero.”¹⁰⁵

Yet, Schmitt points out, Harris-Moore had critics; people who believed he had taken too much license and his troubled upbringing was no excuse for his actions. Those who were critical, Schmitt said, were often people who had personal histories characterized by poverty and abuse close to Harris-Moore’s, while those who celebrated him were further removed from that sort of peripheral neglect:

“Online detractors often cite personal experience of living in poverty or racist social climates as grounds for their criticism of Harris-Moore. To suburban white youth, however, disillusioned with mundane suburban expectations and materialistic ideals, the Barefoot Bandit represents a rejection of modern complacency.”¹⁰⁶

Schmitt suggests that a privileged position, and the existent angst toward its own accumulated material

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Schmitt, “The Barefoot Bandit,” 79.

wealth and complacency it allows, is more likely to identify a heroic cause in Harris-Moore's actions. Meanwhile, those who have firsthand experience with much less as a result of a pre-existing social structure, are more likely to see inconsistencies and less-than-heroic qualities in Harris-Moore. The Barefoot Bandit's human fallibility is plainer to see among these audiences.

Distance seems to be at the root of this discrepancy in attitudes. Richard Meyer, in his analysis of American outlaws, argues that we cannot assume that an understanding is always localized, for "there remains the problem of that other, equally real audience which sees the outlaw in a heroic stance—that vaster conglomerate of people, largely urbanized...far removed from the conditions...which originally spawned the folklore of the outlaw-hero."¹⁰⁷ Those farther away from the action, are more likely to mythologize its circumstances.

While there are differing opinions about the North Pond Hermit in Maine, most of the people I interviewed felt uneasy about putting Knight in the same heroic camp with older, more traditional hermits who lived off the land. The North Pond Hermit's apparent lack of true self-sufficiency and any significant skill in the woods works to his disadvantage here. He is not a traditional survivalist and so loses much of his authority as a Maine hermit. Terms like "thief," "lazy" and "dishonest" emerged consistently in my discussions with people from Maine. Frank Rogers of Patten conceded, with a note of disappointment, that Knight might just well be a "21st century hermit," though perhaps that doesn't say much for the current state of things if today's hermit heroes are sitting atop a hoard of American consumer junk eating potato chips.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Meyer, "The Outlaw: A Distinctive American Folktype," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 17, no. 2/3 (1980): 117.

Essentially, the messages these outlaw stories seem to convey do not always translate neatly, and indeed are often polarized. We might ask ourselves then, what is being asked of these stories and by whom? What vested interested might society have in either the version that supports the hero or the villain? What messages do we want to receive and, as Sandy Ives asks while considering Maine poacher-heroes, how are “the lines [of a story]...sharpened” to get that message across?

In the case of the North Pond Hermit the national media, always hungry for the spectacular,¹⁰⁸ demonstrated perhaps the most overt line sharpening. Christopher Knight, according to novelist Pat O'Donnell in an interview with the *Portland Press Herald*, is an easy guy to glorify. His widely circulated mug shot, she says, shows “this sort of vulnerable, innocent-looking guy,” adding (paraphrased in the article) the “facts that collide with [this] image...are likely to be deemphasized and forgotten over time.” The audacity of Knight's twenty-seven year sojourn as well as the astonishing sensitivity of the man himself who accomplished it is continually emphasized in news articles. Schmitt refers to this journalistic phenomenon as “Robinhooding,” in which the “bravery and sheer nerve of American bandit figures” are emphasized over their lawfulness.¹⁰⁹

Perhaps the best example of the media's tendency toward “Robinhooding” in the case of the North Pond Hermit was a piece published in *GQ Magazine* over a year after the hermit's arrest. Michael Finkel's “The Strange & Curious Tale of the Last True Hermit,” which reportedly “contained some of the first statements Knight had shared with anyone in the world,” claimed to have gained an audience with the notoriously quiet

¹⁰⁸ See: Mark Twain's fictional sketch in *The Curious Republic of Gondour*, “The Wild Man Interviewed” (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919).

¹⁰⁹ Schmitt, 78.

Hermit in the Spotlight: The Solitary Man Made Spectacle

1: "Hermits and their Seekers"

A seeker who signs his article J.M.B., tells the tale of a hermit who lived on "Old Blue"—"a lofty conical Peak, which often thrusts its scathed and barren crown into many a storm and lightning cloud." This place very literally makes contact with the heavens, contends with all the most chaotic forces of the natural world, and insinuates some contact with a supernatural world. According to J.M.B., the mountain is the source of "dark and thrilling legends." Few possess the hardiness to reach its summit, he says.

On one of J.M.B.'s excursions through its "dense, black forests" he met an old hermit, "living almost entirely secluded from his species, and destitute of all society except his dog, cat, a tame crow, and solitude." The old hermit, not only inhabiting the wild, but taming it as if by some supernatural force, J.M.B. concludes, must possess a story to tell.

Indeed, the tale that follows is one of the "times that tried Men's souls."

On how he managed to gain the hermit's trust J.M.B. had only this to say: "How I finally won the old man's confidence, and drew from him the cause of his seclusion, it is unnecessary to relate, as it is well known to every young person whose task it has been to cheer the hours and soothe the care of declining age."*

*J.M.B. "The Old Man of the Mountain: A Truth Stranger than Fiction," *Maine Farmer*, Jun. 3, 1847.

hermit and attempted to reconstruct what life in the woods without social contact for nearly three decades was like for Knight.¹¹⁰

In Finkel's constructed "tale," he plays the hermit's archetypal counterpart as a traditional hermit-seeker¹¹¹ on a journey to locate the remote residence of the recluse and to gain an audience with the elusive man-in-captivity in order to ask him life's most meaningful questions. Finkel effectively sets the tale up as a quest to address FAQs about the hermit,¹¹² reaching directly into the heart of the mystery: "What did he wish to tell us? What secrets had he uncovered? How had he survived?" Finkel's journey, he claims, brings him into contact with a legendary "uncontacted tribe of one." He's "netted the giant squid," he says, and so assumes the authority to address the public's curiosity—to give them the romantic adventure

¹¹⁰ Michael Finkel, "The Strange & Curious Tale of the Last True Hermit," *GQ Magazine*, September 2014.

¹¹¹ See: *The Speculative and the Spectacular*: "Hermits and Their Seekers."

¹¹² Cf. Stanley Keach's ballad concerning the hermit with its refrain: "No, we don't know what the North Pond Hermit knows."

such a tale promises—a “truth...stranger than myth.”¹¹³

Finkel approached Knight first in a letter, and then later, arrived unannounced in person at Kennebec County jail, where he probed the hermit for details about his life in the woods. Finkel says he sat before Knight, feeling “like some great mystic was about to reveal the Meaning of Life,” continually pressing the hermit for the insights he’d gleaned from the woods and personal reasons for leaving civilization. However, despite journalistic proddings, the hermit remained as enigmatic as ever. Knight denied him anything but the most opaque, disengaged answers, telling the journalist that the only advice he could offer from his time at North Pond was, “Get enough sleep.” Knight’s evasiveness leads Finkel to conclude that the man sitting behind the glass partition, speaking “haltingly” into a phone, for “the connection between his mind and mouth seemed atrophied from disuse,”¹¹⁴ was for certain the “last true hermit.”

Finkel is left with a romantically drawn figure, broadly defined by a desperate need for seclusion, but tragically unable to preserve it. Knight writes to Finkel in a letter, “I suspect...more damage has been done to my sanity in jail, in months; than years, decades, in the woods.” Removed from his habitat, the only place he felt “content,” forcibly brought into the society he had run away from, the hermit loses his freedom. Thus, in Finkel’s article, the North Pond Hermit achieves martyrdom. A breed unto himself and ideological adversary of modern day society, the “last true hermit” becomes a tragic hero, his estimated 1,000 thefts placed to the side. Finkel praises him for his authenticity and honesty: “I trusted him. I sensed, in fact, that Chris was practically

¹¹³ C.f. “The Old Man of the Mountain: A Truth Stranger than Fiction”

¹¹⁴ C.f. fictional hermit character “I’m Davis” whose voice was “creaky from disuse” (*Come Spring*, 242).

incapable of lying.” Finkel accepts Knight’s words quietly and without question, “as truth.”¹¹⁵

Pat O’Donnell believes Christopher Knight’s popular appeal rests largely on the remote woodland dream world people imagine him to have lived in: “As, more and more, we are drawn into the digital world and the world of the screen....we kind of long for this romantic idea of, not only going camping or going out into nature for a few days, but actually throwing everything aside and becoming one with nature.” There’s a clear escapist fantasy at work here that’s consistently emphasized in newspaper interviews. Although Knight claims he had no concrete reason for, as he described it, wandering almost unconsciously into the woods, newspapers note the date of his retreat—after the Chernobyl disaster in April of 1986—as if it were a significant inciting incident (rather than perhaps just coincidence).¹¹⁶ There’s the hint of a wish, too, in Larry Stewart’s description of Knight’s life apart from an increasingly hazardous society: “He hasn’t had to endure all the struggles and tragedies that we’ve had to endure since 1986. He hasn’t had to experience some of the things we’ve had to experience.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Finkel, “Strange and Curious Case.”

¹¹⁶ See: Craig Crosby, “After 27 years of burglaries, ‘North Pond Hermit’ is arrested,” *Centralmaine.com*, April 9, 2013. According to the police officers Crosby interviewed, “Knight had no deeper explanation for heading into the woods...He left society after the April 1986 explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Russia, but Perkins-Vance said Knight remembers that event to mark the date of departure rather than to provide its motive.”

¹¹⁷ Abigail Curtis, “North Pond Hermit,” *Bangor Daily News*, April 11, 2013.

Outlaws and Oddities: The Pine Tree State from the Peripheral(2016)

Epilogue: “Hermit to Hero”

“Once upon a time in the hills of Maine,” Carolyn Chute begins the tale of a local hermit named Elmer Walker, who was being featured as the subject of a photography exhibit, “Hermit to Hero.”

Chute, a notable hermit herself, tells Elmer’s retreat from the world this way:

“Out in the world there is evil. There are these institutions all over our land called ‘schools.’ Like prisons and orphanages, children are put in them. These schools are created by the industrialists, using the Prussian model, for insuring conformity, for getting people to give up their interdependence and common sense and their life-sustaining skills, to become dependent on industry for everything... Elmer is not a guy who conforms. Like many of us. Artists, green thumb people, outdoor people, non-competitive people. People who don’t like taking orders, shy people, people who work best alone, people who bore easily, people whose gifts are not honored inside those tall school walls. Elmer decides rather quickly he likes home better.”*

*Tonee Harbert and Carolyn Chute, *Elmer Walker: hermit to hero* (Portland: Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, 1998).

Michael Finkel’s article in *GQ* is that wish-fulfillment. It plays up the escapist fantasy. Finkel, for example, documents going to all the most iconic spots in the North Pond Hermit legend—places that were repeatedly referenced in the news—on his pilgrimage to the hermit’s former dwelling. He camps in the woods by North Pond for three nights, “watching the rabbits by day, at night picking out a few stars behind the scrim of branches” in what he describes as a surreal, natural setting. There, and we must assume Finkel either didn’t mind or omitted the black flies, he gets a feel for the place where the hermit felt most at peace with the world—where he meditated and watched a shelf mushroom grow or lay out in the water, floating on his back, looking up at the stars for nearly three decades: “It was as gorgeous and peaceful a place as I have ever spent time.”

So, why does this make a better story than the one that tells of an insidious villain, living on the fringes and preying on innocent citizens? Why does the hermit’s “resolute” silence come across as an example

of his authenticity rather than as threatening, a deliberate concealment? Of course, that is an incredibly complex question, but I’d like to take a stab at it.

Meyer argues that the outlaw-hero is, “a folkloric manifestation of the desires of an oppressed people for a deliverer, a champion figure who will accomplish in reality what they themselves can only dream of.”¹¹⁸ We live vicariously through these figures actions in telling and re-telling their heroic tales, in as Sandy Ives puts it, “an acceptable and safe expression of continuing hostility to inexorable change.”¹¹⁹ Carolyn Chute puts it this way, “A rescue from inescapable and terrible circumstances. The dream come true. The fairy tale. The greatest tool we humans have. To instruct and help us endure.”¹²⁰ If Knight is a hermit-hero then it’s important to determine the sort of battleground on which he’s fighting—the evil from which he delivers his followers, the catharsis he offers them in the face of “inexorable change.”

Schmitt defines the cause of modern American outlaws as popularly understood to be, “the anarchic and footloose wilderness rebel, rejecting suburban expectations and flying...in the face of materialistic ideals.” The contemporary hero, as exemplified in the North Pond Hermit, resists not only American materialistic values, but a bureaucratic authority that refuses to invest time or sympathy in a fringe individual or to recognize their unique authenticity. Thus, it is easy to put aside the moral inconsistencies in Christopher Knight’s actions, as the law is another manifestation of that institutional authority, and to see those choices as acts of civil disobedience—disobedience that disrupt in order to reach a superior moral state—a push forward that ultimately benefits human society.

¹¹⁸ Meyer, “The Outlaw,” 117.

¹¹⁹ Sandy Ives, “The Poacher as Hero: The Graves Case as Exemplar,” *Forest & Conservation History* 35, no. 1 (1991): 28.

¹²⁰ Carolyn Chute, *Elmer Walker: hermit to hero* (Portland: Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, 1998).

In “Civil Disobedience,” Henry David Thoreau famously calls for the individual, who is, unbeknownst to them in their suppressed circumstances, superior to the state apparatus, to “refuse allegiance.” He asks that the individual “let [their] life be a counter friction to the machinery, which so often buries the humanity of the human person.” A heroic few, he states, “serve the state with their consciences... and so necessarily resist it for the most part,” and tragically, “are commonly treated as enemies by it.”¹²¹ Thoreau is talking about the heroic courage of those who stand in opposition to the state, and speak their *truth* regardless of its inconsistency with the truth as it is put forward by institutions.

But this alternate alliance is seen as political treason. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define this sort traitor as the “anomalous”—an incongruent character on the outskirts, who performs as the leader of an alternate pack, who is its place of access to a new kind of non-state-sanctioned *becoming*, a movement toward its antithesis—the animal, the wild. These characters hold dangerous potential, because they emerge from our own ranks, but ultimately reject the “first family”—the state—for another.¹²² Therefore simultaneously foreign and familiar, of our society and not, they are attractive as such, appealing for what we suppose to know about them and what we do not.

This has historically been the primary function of the “Wild Man” according to Earl Miner, who, “on the one hand...was a cannibal—the ultimate stage of human debasement—and on the other a primitivist model of perfection,” and so throughout history has offered society, “a bewildering picture in the mirror of art...combining bright

¹²¹ Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience” (1849). *University of Virginia American Studies Program*. October, 2003.

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/walden/Essays/civil.html>.

¹²² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 236-46.

colors of idealism with the shadowing of cruelty.”¹²³ This is unsettling because, although the image looks like an unnatural amalgamation of the deeply sacred and the abhorrently profane, it is “all the more human” for those paradoxical tendencies. And so Wild Men emerge as strangely coexistent “heroes and terrors”—anomalies that are perhaps more intensely real *becomings* than we would have ourselves believe.¹²⁴ More generally, one term is dropped and the other remains and the story is shaped to fit the label.

This is interesting given the disparate opinions on the North Pond Hermit’s commitment to silence and desire for invisibility—to some it is terrifying and to others it is a mark of ascetic purity. Knight, as he is portrayed in Finkel’s piece, is a recluse that refuses to interact with his fellow human beings, indeed has forgotten how to, or even exist for them under a distinct label as a recognizable character. He says of his life in the woods: “With no audience, no one to perform for, I was just there. There was no need to define myself...I didn’t even have a name. I never felt lonely. To put it romantically: I was completely free.”¹²⁵ Knight’s concealment in the woods is what allows him social freedom, however, it is that same invisibility that made Rome resident and victim of the hermit’s annual thefts, Carol Sullivan feel so, as she put it, “violated.”¹²⁶

¹²³ Earl Miner, “The Wild Man Through the Looking Glass,” in *The wild man within: an image in Western thought from the Renaissance to romanticism*, ed. Edward Dudley and Maximillian Novak (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), 110.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 93-110.

¹²⁵ Finkel, “Strange and Curious Tale.”

¹²⁶ Adams, “North Pond victim fearful of ‘hermit.’”

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Epilogue: “Hermit to Hero”

There’s still some lingering resentment around the “to” in the title of Tonce Harbert’s 1998 art exhibit at the Maine College of Art. It seems to suggest that Elmer Walker, the hermit-to-hero subject of the photographs, underwent some sort of transition. That he dropped the “hermit” term for the “hero” one.

Harbert says, “Elmer has lived a life of social deprivation and came through it to really shine. Now he’s the nucleus for his community, a reason for people to come together.”*

It’s certainly a drastic change from near complete invisibility to being the object of so many curious eyes. But it raises an important question about the peripheral outlaws and oddities here in Maine, for it seems impossible for someone to live both marginal and central at the same time. So, can a hermit be a hero? Or is it one or the other?

**Tonce Harbert and Carolyn Chute, *Elmer Walker: hermit to hero* (Portland: Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, 1998).

The existence of a paradoxically insidiously invisible, yet inviting, anomaly like the North Pond Hermit, Deleuze and Guattari point out, signals a “rupture” within the establishment. It points out inconsistencies and contradictions in an institution built on the sacredness of its foundation and so prompts the institution to look inward, to assess itself, the legitimacy of its own authority, and so is unsettling, destabilizing, and therefore necessary to contain.¹²⁷

Thus, men like the North Pond Hermit must be either heroes or villains, they must either be rejected or invited in. “The Church,” for example, “has always burned sorcerers, or reintegrated anchorites into the toned-down image of a series of saints.”¹²⁸ And so stories must be told to bring them out of the shadows, to domesticate them and send them to their appropriate corners, to make an example out of them

as something the state already knows or possesses—and in the case of the hero, of what it already aspires to, what it is already becoming.

Miner argues, “The process of taming is in no small degree a process of learning on the one hand to see the Wild Man or savage in oneself, and on the other the

¹²⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, “A Thousand Plateaus,” 247.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 248.

gradual alteration of the Wild Man from a real outside terror into a metaphorical creation.”¹²⁹ The legend of the North Pond Hermit, whether it tells of a phantom that once lived in the woods haunting residents, or an extraordinary man taking a stand and living as freely as possible, is dependent on whether he is personally identifiable and in what manner he can be symbolically handled. These factors will determine whether he is pushed out into the periphery, back into the wild and perhaps forgotten, or brought into society as a legendary nucleus around which we can gather.

¹²⁹ Miner, “The Wild Man Through the Looking Glass,” 110.

“On This Spot”: Shin Pond’s Most Peculiar Hermit

Not everyone called him Greenleaf. He had other names—like Hunter and Hermit and “Grand Old Man of the Woods.”¹³⁰ He was a bear hunter, a nature lover, a fiddler, a poet, and a little old hermit.¹³¹ He dressed in furs and wore a foxtail plume with “Pamola”¹³² stitched into its front and carried a big pair of snowshoes with him everywhere he went. He meant different things to different people living in a town where you can see Mt. Katahdin from certain westward-facing windows, a place in northern Maine called Patten. Alone, living on the shore of Shin Pond, Greenleaf lived an extraordinary life—enigmatic, tragic and stubbornly vigorous—as only a hermit’s life can be.

Greenleaf was said to have been born in 1820 in a town south of Patten called Lincoln, but he didn’t stay there long. As a young man he went West, all the way to California, to try his luck in the Gold Rush. Ten years passed, apparently with little luck, and he returned to his hometown empty-handed. Though some say he lied about his fortune, that he struck gold, but was keeping it hidden somewhere secret, which was commonly said of recluses in those days.¹³³

¹³⁰ “Shin Pond Hermit is a Grand Old Man.” *The Spokesman Review*. June 20, 1915, 8.

¹³¹ By birth, a small Finnish man some also liked to call, “Little Davis.”

¹³² An Abenaki word, according to Charles Elwell, referring to the “Guardian Spirit of Katahdin.”

¹³³ Tales spun around hermits hoarding vast amounts of wealth are frequent. Carl Shilling, a famous hermit gold miner in Maine was said to have buried a large amount of gold (C.J. Stevens, “Carl Shilling,” in *The Next Bend In the River*, 30-48. Phillips: J. Wade, 1989), as was Jim Whyte, the mysterious hermit-opium dealer of Monson (Roland J. Sawyer, “The Mystery of Jim Whyte and His Woodland ‘Lookout,’” *Boston Herald*, Jan. 7, 1934). and Timothy Barrett of Montville who was said to have kept his money “secreted in a horn.” (“The Hermit of Montville.” *Maine Farmer*. Mar. 15, 1849. 2).

Around then is when the story gets foggy. It is rumored that Greenleaf once loved a woman who was brought up in his family home, but was of no relation. Greenleaf grew to love this woman and planned to marry her, but his family strongly disapproved of the match. So, when Greenleaf left for California, his father hid the letters he sent to his betrothed. And when Greenleaf returned, the young woman had married another.¹³⁴ So Greenleaf, naturally furious, broke all familial ties, “shook the dust of Lincoln from his feet and began his life of solitude.”¹³⁵ The tale’s truth is uncertain, for when Greenleaf was ever asked he said only that he had been done “a great injustice” early on in life.

Whatever the reason, one day Greenleaf packed a knapsack with books by poets like Tennyson, Byron, Whittier, and Moore, grabbed his trusty rifle, a Winchester he’d christened, “Napoleon Bonaparte,” and went on foot—fifty miles North—to Patten. He came to a spot he liked, on the west bank of Shin Pond, 10 miles and a canoe trip from town. The place was thickly populated with fir, spruce, pine, and poplar—all wild and untouched.¹³⁶ Except for an old tote road at the southern edge of the pond, there were no trails to speak of. On this spot of untrodden ground, Greenleaf built himself a cabin, cleared some space for a garden and settled in to a quiet life apart.

In those days men like Greenleaf were not uncommon. They came, as Greenleaf did, with a knapsack and a rifle, looking for a place to work hard and live peacefully, far from the politics of people. These men were called, “recluses.” But Greenleaf was not really a recluse. Although you couldn’t quite call him amiable, and he had a weird sort of

¹³⁴ In alternate accounts the woman died tragically unaware of Greenleaf’s undying love for her.

¹³⁵ Lore A. Rogers, “Hunter Davis, the Hermit of Shin Pond.” *Bangor Daily News*, May 5, 1972.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

paranoia about recording devices in trees,¹³⁷ Greenleaf liked people well enough to trek into town on his snow shoes every once in a while, invite passersby in for a quick fiddle tune, or submit poetry for public reading.

He was Patten's Hermit, different from the other recluses, for his local popularity and wide renown.¹³⁸ Indeed, Greenleaf was a bit of local celebrity—notable for his expert shot and speedy woods travel, intelligent, though with a tinge of strangeness about him, small, but surprisingly strong, and remarkably well-acquainted with all the local animal life (hundreds of woodpeckers for his “research” into birdseye maple markings, a pair of tame crows, a set of robins, numerous beaver contacts, a nameless fox, and a dog named Lion, it was said, were among his regular society). In photos—standing outside his log cabin in suspenders with a fiddle, a silhouette of him in his canoe on Shin Pond, or rigidly upright in a chair with his snowshoes at his back and good old-fashioned cantankerous expression—Greenleaf was a sight to see, a man of much earlier times, of way back when men and women were still pioneering on the land.

And so people told stories about the Grand Old Man of the Woods by Shin Pond and some even wrote them down in newspapers and autobiographies, so we can still read them today. Some stories told of young Greenleaf leading Thoreau, that famous nature-writer from Massachusetts, on a trip up Katahdin. Others told of how he scared the “Red Man” away from town and killed 250 bears in his day. Another relates the time beavers

¹³⁷ N.B. Paranoia plagues a fair number of hermits—notably Jim Whyte, Carl Shilling, and Old Father Sinkly.

¹³⁸ Rhonda Brophy, the curator at the Patten Lumberman's Museum, informed me that there is a historical distinction between recluses and hermits. Recluses, she said, are hostile to most human contact. Hermits, however, have a social life (whether solicited or not). People in town pay attention to them for their apparent strangeness or noteworthy skills. Though they choose to live apart, hermits play a role in the region's social life.

patched up his hovel during a flood. And still one more tells of the little old hermit, who lived to a remarkable age (96 to be precise), drinking from a fountain of youth.

Greenleaf was, and still is, a character you tell outsiders about when they come to visit. And on a warm summer's day you might show them the place where the little old hermit used live, over where the Rogers' camp now sits. There's a stone monument there. You'll bend down to take a closer look at what's etched into it and it will tell you, although you already know it from the stories: "On this spot Greenleaf Davis lived alone for 40 year, ca. 1820-1915."

I met Frank Rogers at the Wilderness Variety Store, a convenience store in Patten with two picnic tables and vintage gasoline pumps, the kind that have always looked to me like they have the machinery of soda shoppe gumball machines and would possibly take quarters to operate. The lot was nearly empty. Sitting at a picnic table, I could see a few older men through the store windows conversing and a man filling his gas tank—no evidence of quarters or credit card. I got the sense that this place was a local watering hole, that everyone here knew each other, and had likely known each other for quite a while, in a town with a population of about one-thousand. The people here probably hadn't locked their cars. I'd hesitated before I locked mine.

Frank, a man of about sixty I'd guessed, walked out of the variety store in clothing I always associate with camping, thick cotton t-shirt (ideally resistant to mosquito puncture), khaki cargo pants and cap—comfortable, practical, durable. He extended a hand and asked me where I was from—a question here which often bears

some anxiety for anyone not from Maine. I told him, with due hesitation, that I was from Massachusetts. Frank raised an eyebrow, chuckling. “Well that’s too bad,” he said.

Admittedly, as we sat in Frank’s boat motoring across Lower Shin Pond minutes later, I had to agree. It was a far cry from suburban Massachusetts. The color contrasts in the encircling scenery were startling distinct—deep shades of green wrapped around shimmering waves of a dark sea tint, above which was a dome of bright, lucid blue sky, and two triangle-shaped shadowy peaks of Mt. Katahdin, only a shade darker than the sky, in the background. The air was fresh, almost cold-smelling, though the day was warm. Aside from the boat’s motor, it was quiet.

We motored along leisurely, slowing here and there at points. Frank showed me the length of what was once Greenleaf Davis’s land—land he’d claimed by squatter’s rights—that, in the hermit’s later years, was sold off piecemeal in 8-10 acre lots to pay for his elderly care at a nearby farm.¹³⁹ One of those lots went to Frank’s family—his grandfather, Lore A. Rogers—the summer camp toward which the boat was directed.

Lore Rogers is a well-known figure in Patten. He graduated from the University of Maine in 1896 with a degree in agriculture, and would later become famous as a microbiologist for his contributions to milk pasteurization techniques. In 1963 he co-founded the Patten Lumbermen’s Museum, a place still running today, which “documents Maine logging history by preserving the logging heritage and accomplishments of early inhabitants of the state of Maine.”¹⁴⁰ Frank Rogers is now the president of that museum.

Frank told me that he first heard about Greenleaf Davis from his grandfather. It was a story that he said had, “lingered on,” in the family for quite some time. Lore

¹³⁹ Rogers, “Hunter Davis, the Hermit of Shin Pond.”

¹⁴⁰ Museum website: <http://www.lumbermensmuseum.org/>

Rogers, who would have been alive during the hermit's later years, wrote about Greenleaf at length, chronicling the life of "Lower Shin Pond's Hermit," in an article for the Bangor Daily News in 1972. You can also hear him talking about the hermit in the Island Falls Oral History archives.

Most, except for the "historically motivated," Frank said, likely don't know much about Davis. This lack of historical awareness seemed to Frank to be in part symptomatic of modern mobility, a real declining interest in the local, as people move out and away, while others coming from away might stop only momentarily on the highway to take a "scenic" photo of Katahdin (which I did) before moving on. Fifty years ago, he said, nearly 10,000 people were visiting the Lumbermen's Museum. Today, that number is in decline.

Frank saw the beginnings of that shift in public attention taking place sometime in the 1950's—a time, which he said, marked the end of the "horse-drawn era" and the beginning of near-complete dependence on motorized vehicles.¹⁴¹ New roads extended into woods that at one time might have taken weeks to cross on foot. As the ease of access and mobility increased, people's rhythms changed, Frank said. He noted, for example, the difference between the rhythms of the local Amish community and that of modern lifestyles—a rhythmic distinction I felt very acutely later that day on my way out of Patten when passing a long line of horse-drawn buggies on the side of the road, which even while slowing down a bit, felt uncomfortably discordant.

During that time lumbering, in particular, said Frank, altogether transformed into a different activity. It became mechanized, automated. Work in the woods that once took

¹⁴¹ Interview, August 3, 2015.

a team months, years for the little old hermit, now takes a matter of days. Men who would have had to spend a good part of the year in the woods could now drive home at the end of the day and return in the morning. And the operations themselves expanded in scope. What were once localized industries are statewide productions today.

Frank was critical of the effects of industrialization on the region, the way it tended to bypass meditation on the local—on the individual person, physical landscape and historical roots of a place—as inefficient, in favor of standardization, unconscious movement. The modern pace inclines itself forward, collecting momentum in a way that

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3: “The Pitiful & the Profane”

Time is a funny concept for those living on the outskirts of society, who are unfamiliar with clocks, apart from biological ones.

One hermit, by the name of Old Cling, comes to mind straight away as a character with a particularly strange relationship to time.

It was said the whenever Old Cling ever heard the ticking of clock hands he would run away, screaming “Murder!” at the top of his lungs.

People said he likely never stayed indoors long, preferring his shelter under a beached boat, for so many townspeople owned clocks that ticked.*

*W.F.D. “A Hermit,” *Maine Farmer*, Jan. 27, 1877.

feels disorienting and placeless, for there’s much less time to meditate on place through the window of a car going seventy miles per hour. Greenleaf, Frank said, would have had a very different sense of place. After all, for forty years he’d lived in the same spot on Shin Pond, navigating the woods in his snowshoes, and hunting for weeks at a time. In Greenleaf’s day, Frank said, “time was a different element.”¹⁴²

When I consider my sense of time, I think about how it is largely accounted for, how precisely it designs the day, and how its worth is determined by the amount of productivity it can claim. This sense of time is largely focused on projections—what I hope to, or believe I should accomplish in a block of time. It focuses on the

¹⁴² Interview, August 3, 2015.

future, on a destination arrived at—efficiently. Tim Ingold might describe this sense of movement through space as a state of “transport,” which “carries the passenger across a pre-prepared, planar surface,” a motion of “lateral displacement” that “connects a point of embarkation with a terminus.”¹⁴³ The road is concerned with ease of access and speed. It is unconscious. It delivers the traveler at their destination. At a pre-determined speed, in ideal weather and traffic conditions, it will get you from point A to point B in an exact amount of calculable time.

However, Frank pointed out, movement in the woods asks something more of us. It asks for more of our time, and ambiguous quantities of it. It asks for our conscious attention, an immediate awareness of the goings on, of weather, and as Ingold points out, of a world that we must traverse through and not simply over. This is the experience of the “wayfarer,” an individual who “negotiates or improvises a passage as he goes along,” whose essential goal is to maintain that “ongoing movement.”¹⁴⁴ It is significant that the hermit in Maine is time and again described as nomadic, strategically making their way through the wild, some even covering their tracks,¹⁴⁵ as far from the nearest road as possible and famously doing so with ease and no visible anxiety. Greenleaf Davis, it was said, walked fifty miles to Patten, crossed into land that had “not yet heard a man’s ax” and settled into a life apart.¹⁴⁶ Traversing this country is a slow activity. Getting into town, Frank said, would have taken Greenleaf a week of walking.

¹⁴³ Tim Ingold, “Footprints through the weather-world: walking, breathing, knowing,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16, no. 1 (2010): S126

¹⁴⁴ Ingold, “Footprints through the weather-world,” S126.

¹⁴⁵ See: North Pond Hermit and Ralph Perkins.

¹⁴⁶ Rogers, “Hunter Davis.”

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3: “The Pitiful and the Profane”

Many of the characters in the backwoods of Maine are known to have a frightening number of pets. It’s unclear whether local wildlife are simply attracted to something animal in the wild man’s own spirit, or perhaps actually believe that they are of the same species and pack.

One such notable man was a hermit that lived up around Moxie and was said to have had hundreds of cats living with him in his forest home. He appeared to be their leader, for when the hermit died and logging contractors came by, aiming to remove the body, the hermit’s feline protectors prevented the men from transporting the man out of his wild resting place, by reportedly knocking over a kerosene lamp and setting the hut on fire. The Hermit of Moxie, thanks to his cat companions, forever stayed out of the clutches of human society.*

*Holman F. Day, “The Hermit of Moxie,” *Forest and Stream; A Journal of Outdoor Life*, Jan. 11, 1902, LVII.

Time, as Frank describes it in Greenleaf’s day, is a different element in that it is not abstractly detached from, but intricately bound up in navigation around obstacles, ongoing movement, and is sensitive to shifts in the environment. It has a more immediate felt quality. The hermit, supposedly bound to the natural rhythms of an ecosystem, is believed to become seasonal, their sense of self in time dispersed and indistinguishable from their surroundings. The hermit watches life unfolding around them and unfolds with it—a natural participant in the society of trees. Associations with animals are therefore unsurprising. Greenleaf was famous not only for his many animal companions, but also for his skill with tracking animals, and his

near-animal strength. Frank believed it was likely true that Greenleaf had killed 250 bears

While sitting on the deck of Frank’s cabin, looking out at the incredibly still water of Shin Pond, I asked Frank what the woods might offer a man like Greenleaf. Frank said, “solace.” Here, where things moved slower, it was possible to reflect and learn more about oneself. The woods might be unforgiving, but they could also shelter you, offer you solitude and silence, a space for reflection. Frank returns to his family’s camp annually. Far from the modern frenzy, it’s a place that is reinvigorating—a way to reacquaint with origins.

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3: “The Pitiful and the Profane”

Weird Woodland Hobbyists

Even the most destitute of woods dwellers had hobbies to pass the time. They were not quite so common as reading or skiing, but strange and (basically) useless in most cases.

One old recluse, who called himself, “Mediator Brown,” claimed to have access to the spirit world and would tell people’s fortunes, regardless of whether or not they actually requested a fortune told.**

**Monson roundtable interview, July 20, 2015.

Frank was also of the opinion that the woods was good for the human intellect. It was in part what made Greenleaf a true “renaissance man,” for the hermit “was more worldly than one would believe.” Indeed, he wrote political poetry concerning the injustice of slavery, commented on hunter’s rights, took hunting groups on tours, researched birdseye maple and its supposed causal relationship to woodpeckers and was a fiddler, though reportedly not a good one.¹⁴⁷

Living here on one’s own would have required considerable intelligence, the kind that reaches into all parts of the self. To negotiate a relationship with the woods on a daily basis takes not only a considerable amount of strength, but also multi-faceted mental cunning, and likely a bit of luck. Unsurprisingly, Lore Roger’s biography of Greenleaf reads like an introductory lesson on homesteading, sustainability and conservation.

I found these sentiments reflected in a round-table discussion of hermits in Monson.¹⁴⁸ According to Robert Robertson, a man who has worked in the woods for the

¹⁴⁷ See: 2015 Fiddlehead Fest poster, which is decorated with an image of “Hunter” Greenleaf Davis. Lore A. Roger’s is quoted on the back of the poster saying of Greenleaf’s fiddling, “No doubt, ‘Hunter’ Greenleaf Davis played his homemade fiddle (violin), perhaps not very well, in the long lonely night hours, furnishing music for his ears alone. It would have drowned out the night sounds of the forest, the groan of the windblown tree rubbing against its neighbor, the husky bark of the fox, the blood-curdling cry of the bobcat or loupcevrier, and ‘peopling’ his cabin with friendly spirits from a land of poets.”

¹⁴⁸ In-person interview, July 20, 2015.

better part of his life, there is a tendency to look at hermits in the area as living some idyllic life apart, but to live alone in the woods for even just a few weeks is incredibly difficult. You have to be extremely intelligent and experienced to go it alone. Glenn Poole, a man also in attendance at the Monson discussion, defined this as “woods wise” – indicative of someone who is well-versed in how to survive in and navigate the woods independently. Woods wisdom is important to people in Monson. It identifies those who work closely with the natural environment.

The Monson discussion largely focused on the practicalities of living in the woods—how to hunt, to travel in a dense forest without trails, to stay warm in the winter, etc. These details were continually emphasized over some natural identification with the woods, or liberating idealism. When asked how Thoreau’s two-year sojourn at Walden Pond compares to a Monson hermit’s lifestyle, all agreed that there was almost no comparison. Next to rugged Monson hermits like Walter Arnold and Ralph Perkins, Thoreau’s experiment was almost laughably easy. Frank agreed, likening Thoreau’s time in the woods to “a carnival.”¹⁴⁹

According to Frank, such a challenging lifestyle, the daily test of skill and strength, had “enhanced” Greenleaf, and was likely why he lived to 96 years of age. He wasn’t exactly in town “drinking diet coke,” Frank said, and so was nothing like the North Pond Hermit, whom he thought could barely be considered a true hermit for his lack of woods wisdom. In Greenleaf’s time to live remotely meant that one had know how to fend for themselves.

¹⁴⁹ In-person interview, August 3, 2015.

The place where Greenleaf's hovel once was is not far from the shore of Shin Pond; only about a five or ten minute walk (though the time is an imprecise guess, because, with neighborly talk—a different kind of navigation that Greenleaf never had to trouble himself with—the trip was closer to half an hour) from the Rogers' camp. We came to a small circle of cleared land, where there is a roughly hewn memorial stone and a mowed spot facing Shin Pond, which is supposed to be the exact site of the hermit's dwelling. It is a quiet, unassuming place, half-hidden behind a ring of trees. The sort of spot where you have to know what you are looking for in order to find it. One that is communally known.

I asked Frank whether he thought the hermit played a significant role in his family history. He said he believed it did, that as far as he was concerned, Greenleaf was a member of the family. They shared land with the hermit, were his descendants in a way, and so held spatial memory in common. This place *mattered* in part, because Greenleaf was there first. This is what had been passed down to them—this legacy of caring for the land they sat on.

Keith Basso, in his study of place and spatial memory, asserts that awareness of places makes them matter.¹⁵⁰ Places that matter encourage self-reflection. In sensing a place, we dwell on it—and so open ourselves to dwelling within it. Basso cites Heidegger saying, “dwelling is said to consist in the multiple ‘lived relationships’ that people maintain with places.”¹⁵¹ These relationships are brought about and held in stories about those places, are lived when we make contact with a space by telling its stories.

¹⁵⁰ Keith H. Basso, “Wisdom Sits in Places.” In *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 53-58.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 54.

In terms of hermit lore, this is incredibly salient. As noteworthy eccentric characters, hermits make us aware of places in that they represent a defining feature of an environment. Often in their various monikers they even invoke those places: the Hermit of Manana Island, the Hermit of Montville, the North Pond Hermit, and the Hermit of Shin Pond, are just a few examples. They are defined by their environments, while also participating as features of those landscapes. Hermits in their time, and more importantly, after their time, function as landmarks, which travelers stop in at and where they might reflect on stories they remember or have heard,¹⁵² which as Basso points out, tend to drift toward personal aspects of the individual's life, for "where the mind may lead is anybody's guess."¹⁵³

The argument could be made that hermits therefore foster a sense of dwelling in these wild, remote spaces. Stories we tell about our environments are colored by imaginative "roving," our own sense of self as it relates to place. Basso suggests this is primarily the function of the folk mind: "the self-conscious experience of a place...(its intentional thrust, its substantive content, its affective tones and colorings) is shaped at every turn by the personal and social biography of the one who sustains it."¹⁵⁴ So hermit tales perform as a foothold for us in alien realms. In our minds, regardless of whether the earth is wild and unprepared for human dwelling, we witness, if only in stories, a human being making a living in untouched landscapes, giving its first significance as a "place."

¹⁵² N.B. Cora Buzzell Millay on her drive through Waldo County, stopping (in both the text of the article and in her travels) to wonder at the hermit supposedly buried on an island in the middle of a pond amidst the "pine forests" of Searsmont.

¹⁵³ Basso, 56

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 54

Thus, we are pulled outside of ourselves, to invest in the landscape, and simultaneously back inward, where that landscape plants itself and becomes ours, as Basso explains, “relationships to places are lived most often in the company of other people.”¹⁵⁵ In my experiences in both Monson and Patten the people I spoke to drew out large cultural webs of place-based meaning when telling stories about hermits. They discussed who had lived or worked where and when, how places had changed hands or how the places themselves had changed over time. The telling of a hermit tale was coded with a whole local network of local histories and interpersonal relationships, as well as social commentary and critique—an entire legacy of interactions with and within a place.

In the Patten Lumbermen’s Museum, whose mission remember is to preserve the “heritage and accomplishments” of its earliest inhabitants, there is a slim portion of wall dedicated to Greenleaf Davis. On it hangs a framed article about the hermit and his handcrafted fiddle, as well as a famous picture of Davis with his snow shoes, the rifle named “Napoleon Bonaparte,” his fiddle in his lap, two funny-looking tufts of white hair on either side of his head, and stern set eyes. This portrait is iconic around Maine. You can find it easily on the Maine Memory Network. Although many don’t know who the old, clearly-from-Maine, man is, you’ll find him on posters, and on beer labels for the Penobscot Brewing Co. Something in him evokes place—an obvious Maine-type of place. The image’s iconography tells enough of his story.

I focused my camera on Greenleaf’s memorial stone, which is overgrown with moss in places and such a roughly cut boulder it is easy to look over. The words etched

¹⁵⁵ Basso, 56-7.

into its front are worn, but still legible. “On this spot,” it reads, “Greenleaf Davis lived for forty years.”

4. IMAGINARY LANDSCAPE: “VACATIONLAND”

In the towns of Jay, Wilton, Cathage, Avon, and Weld, may be found specimens of the most rugged and broken Country ever visited by vitality...such abrupt massive cliffs of Granite and dire scathed peaks, as lie scattered about in prodigal confusion, seem to indicate that here was the last drawn battle between Order and Chaos.

--J. M. B. “The Old Man of the Mountain: A Truth Stranger Than Fiction”

There was something peculiarly touchingly romantic about the creature and his strange actions, according to the newspaper reports. He was represented as being hairy, long-armed and of great strength and stature; ugly and cumbrous; avoiding men, but appearing suddenly and unexpectedly to women and children... living in the woods like a wild beast, but never angry; moaning, and sometimes howling, but never uttering articulate sounds. Such was “Old Shep” as the papers painted him. I felt that the story of his life must be a sad one—a story of man’s inhumanity to man in some shape or other—and I longed to persuade the secret from him.

--Mark Twain, “The Wild Man Interviewed”

Interviewer: Okay, it's recording.

Henrietta Conifer: ... (blunt scraping of mug against coarse wood)

Interviewer: (shuffling papers) So last time we talked about your early childhood in the Tract and the people you knew who once lived there, but now I'm curious about outsiders—visitors who came to the park. What were they like?

H. C.: People from away? Well, there were plenty every year—folks lucky enough to make it past The Moose anyway (soft chuckle)—and they were alright. Usually pleasant enough to get along with. They didn't much bother us, just sort of ogled you know, which you get used to after awhile. Some would hide behind these big cameras, so you never once saw their faces, just these big hollow lens-pupils following you around while you were tapping trees or picking blueberries. That was harder to get used to.

Interviewer: Why?

H.C.: Well, all of us kids developed this sort of complex about dark windows or screens and things—just any transparent container that seem to hold a kind of limitless darkness with a machinery behind it you can't see. It's a creepy feeling—like something is being deliberately hidden from you even though it looks transparent. I used to have a recurring nightmare about those pitch black lenses—thousands of them—in a great big mass, collected like in the eyes of a fly, approaching, always getting bigger until that's all I could see and feel. And I would touch the glass and it would be like touching the soul of something Else. And it was cold—bone-rattling cold.

Interviewer: (scribbling noises) Did they ever put up signs to prohibit photography?

H.C.: It was a national park, and so we didn't actually own the land. We didn't set the rules. They did. (slurping noise, followed by uncomfortable, large-sounding gulps).

Interviewer: Were there any stand-out visitors that you can remember? People you got along with well or were interesting in some way?

H.C.: Well, you'd get all sorts of characters, people who were there for different reasons. But two come to mind right away. These two guys who came looking to investigate a local legend. I didn't get the full story until after the relocation. I was about five or six when they came. And only a handful of people actually met them, but there was enough talk that you'd think the entire Tract had invited them in for coffee and biscuits.

Interviewer: What were they like?

H.C.: Well, they were an odd-looking couple I guess. Didn't match too well. And I don't think they liked each other much either. One was kind of scraggly-looking, with a hat and a gold earring. Always smoking. The other was dressed sharp, nice shoes and all. A little pudgy around the face and waist. He had an accent—British, I think. Judith Spruce, one of the descendants of that earmuff inventor I mentioned before, had one of the best descriptions. When they walked up to her window, she said it was like “a freshly de-clawed coon cat and a black-capped chickadee in mourning” (chuckles). Other people—one of the logging teams and a trapper by the name of Frank Fir—said they'd arrived “already-queer” (meaning already woods-queer), and the woods would make short work of them. The Rockefellers even offered them a lift back to the gate once they saw what bad shape the guys were in (it was no real

vacation up there, you know), but they were pretty determined, for their own reasons, to “persuade the secret.”

Interviewer: What secret?

H.C.: Have you heard of a man called the Hermit Lenny B? Some also know him as Big-Booted Bean...

Interviewer: (sound of shifting body weight) No, never heard of him.

H.C.: Well, that’s who they were after.

.....

As I heard it, Fink and Ayer met one day in a Dysart’s on the outskirts of the Tract. They’d reached for the same 16oz bottle of Moxie—the last bottle on the shelf, the last bottle of anything on any of the shelves, looked like the place had been cleaned out, but no one had bothered to restock it. Fink had never seen Moxie before so he thought it was like a microbrew or something. Plus he seemed to take the label as a challenge—did he have the moxie to drink it, you know?. And well Ayer on the other hand, wasn’t familiar with this particular American soft drink so he reached for it out of an intellectual curiosity about American-size products that were technically two servings (sometimes two and a half) but sold as if they were one serving in anticipation of bloated American appetites.

And so Ayer, who had a tighter handle on social graces (and there is consensus on that among folks who know the story) says,

“Oh, no you go ahead. I insist.”

And Fink, without hesitation snatches up the bottle for himself and presently after could be seen chugging it outside the stop and claiming a buzz from what is basically just bitter-tasting syrup.

Standing there across the road from the park Fink and Ayer realize rather quickly it's just the two of them heading for the entrance (like I said, the Tract hadn't been getting much in the way of visitors at that point). And so they had to acknowledge each other. Fink tips his hat—a kind of Indiana Jones style, you know those crushable fedoras—in Ayer's direction and Ayer nods in acknowledgement and then it's awkward, because you can tell these guys like to go solo, but now they have to walk down this logging road together to get to the gate.

And so Fink says, “So what brings you here?”

And Ayer says, “Research. I'm studying New England hermits, recluses, Thoreau-types, a sort of comparative analysis with our own, back in England.”

Fink: “Really? Weird. I'm after one myself.”

Ayer: “Oh?”

Fink: “Goes by big Booted Bean. Heard of him?”

Ayer: “Well yes I have, actually. Just got through talking to a woman a town further south. She called him Lenny, but mentioned the sobriquet.”

“Sobriquet” is really where the footing started getting rocky for the pair of them. Between discrepancies in accents, degree levels, and institutional investments, linguistically speaking, they did not speak the same language. Or at least, being successful men in their respective dialects, didn’t want to. They did, however, exchange names easily enough—getting titles and things squared away for each other’s benefit.

Fink: “Arnold Fink—drop the Arnold, call me Fink—Senior Staff Adventurer for National Geographic and Freelance, Free-Falling Adrenaline Junkie on the weekends.”

Ayer: “Dr. Bernard Ayer, Professor of Anthropology at Cambridge University and Honorary Editor of the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute.”

Fink: “Ah, so we’re kind of on the same page, then. Chasing that ever-elusive, mysterious ‘Other,’ the world ‘round.’”

Fink, who had thrown up air quotes around the big “O” word and made a face like he was setting the mood for a ghost story, didn’t get much more than a nod out of Ayer for that observation. And then they shook hands—which is especially awkward timing-wise when you’re walking and don’t particularly want to shake hands.

Fink: “So, what have you heard about the guy so far?”

Ayer: “Oh bits and pieces, nothing substantial.”

Fink: “Hm. Me too.”

Sort of like with trappers after the best skins, secrets were a stock in trade for these guys.

When they reached the end of the logging road, Ayer and Fink came out onto a grassy clearing where Judith Spruce was sitting at the gate, snoozing in a big rocking chair she had put in there for noontime naps. The chair was actually a tough squeeze, and didn’t really rock so well, because the gate was about the size and shape of a highway toll booth. But Judith had been pretty adamant about it. She felt like a real queen sitting up there on her throne, which was up high enough that she could peer down at people walking beneath her nose. She was a queer old woman. Always insisted on wearing a giant pair of beaver fur earmuffs, no matter the season, and wearing a nametag that read, “Great-great-granddaughter of Chester Greenwood,” as if any of us could forget.

Well, you can imagine what Fink and Ayer must of thought of that old woman, snoring at her post behind a large piece of glass, which wasn’t just a window but kind of a full-body length frame with a rectangle cut out for her to slip things through and a speaker she talked into; looked like a doll in a box, sitting on the shelf at Walmart. They had to knock on the glass pretty hard to get her attention.

Judith handed them a map through the slot and, because she never took those darn earmuffs off, she hollered out all the instructions about The Moose at a volume that was

hard to understand. “Wait for the nod,” I remember her saying over and over to every visitor, and sometimes she’d whisper it with a bit of tune as she herself nodded off back to sleep.

Fink: “What d’ya mean *the nod*?”

Judith: “I said wait for it.”

Fink: “But who’s nod?”

Ayer: “I think she mentioned a moose.”

Judith: “No. *The Moose*. You have to wait for the nod.”

Fink: “That doesn’t make any sense. Why can’t we just walk in?”

Judith: “You need to wait for the nod first.”

Fink: “*Why*? What’s a moose got to do with us walking into a public park?”

Judith: “*The Moose*. And don’t try going around Him.”

Ayer: “I think she’s been pretty clear.”

Judith: “Do what you want. Wait for the nod, don’t wait for the nod. It’s not my business if you get dumped on or not.”

Fink: “What?”

Fink and Ayer heard her cackling at that last bit, even as they reached the mouth of the footpath that led to *The Moose*. There wasn’t much that was charming about her laugh. She had no teeth, so her insides seemed hollow and her skin sort of gathered up like a rug that needs straightening out. The cackling usually ended in a snort that settled into a snore.

At the end of the footpath, which was really barely anymore than a deer trail, all knotted with roots and rocks, Fink and Ayer saw what Judith meant by *The Moose*. I don't know where it came from or how it got so big or how old it was. It had just always been there for as long as anybody could remember. It was giant, like three stories tall. And you'd look up and see its matted hide, which alternated between ballooning and collapsing at a rhythm that never once changed, and these big crusted nostrils that flared to the same beat with each exhale, blackflies circling its head, puffins circling its hooves and great globs of saliva always dripping down its chin, which collected in a sort of viscous pond between a set of massive hooves, each about the size of a small car. Except for the breathing, The Moose always stood very still, like it was sleeping, or maybe not alive, or really well-trained to just stand there—somewhere between statue and sentinel. For as long as I can remember it was always that way.

And Fink and Ayer would have seen the old sign, above which hung a pair of old moose antlers and a moose skull, and the sign said: "To our honored guests: Please stick to the trail, 'else you'll join the others who've a'ready gone stale."

In those days going around The Moose wasn't really an option. The area was all pine and fir so dense it was basically impenetrable. Those woods were no joke. Any person who left the trail was never seen again.

Fink: "So, what do we do?"

Ayer: “The trail continues under the Moose, I think”

Ayer at this point had the map out. The park used to give out these giant pictorial maps, that looked like a kind of patchwork maze of seemingly incongruent images that always made me think of those I Spy books that had marbles and buttons and animal figurines all thrown together in a big confusing mess. The maps seemed regular-sized, when they were all nicely factory-folded, but were really just these masterful origami illusions. You could pull at one corner just right and the whole thing would unravel and drop clear down to your feet. And getting a good view of it width-wise required you to use your full wing span. I think they made them so big because they needed the relative distances between places to look just right. There were warning signs all around the park so it wasn't really liable for any lives lost, but it doesn't look good to have a high body count in the papers. So they did their best to make it easy to follow.

Fink: “So, what's the deal--we're just supposed to walk under its legs after the old goat finishes its nap?”

Weirdly enough, Dr. Ayer was pretty comfortable with the idea of walking under The Moose's ancient belly like it was no different than walking down a corridor to a different wing in a building. In his travels he'd explored enough stories about the habits of the English nobility and their hermit “pets,” to be basically immune to this kind of thing. As long as he had careful control over each step he took—at the very least for the sake of his brown leather wing-tip boots—he was up for weirdness.

Fink on the other hand really did seem like that “freshly de-clawed cat”—hopping around anxiously, pacing and smoking.

Fink: “This is weird.”

Ayer: “It’ll be fine. We just have to wait until it wakes.”

Fink: “Well what happens if we don’t?”

Ayer: “I’m not keen to find out.”

Fink: “Well maybe if we just tested it.”

Ayer: “How?”

Fink: “By like, throwing a rock through his legs. You know, check for like sensors or something.”

Ayer: “Go ahead.”

Nothing happened when the rock was thrown. So they waited, but The Moose wasn’t moving anytime soon, and all the adrenaline must have really been accumulating in Fink’s vital veins, because soon he really couldn’t stand it any longer.

Fink: “Fuck it. I’m going through. I really don’t want to be here when it wakes.”

Ayer: “I wouldn’t. The woman said to wait. There’s no reason for her to lie--”

Fink: “That lady was nuts. I doubt you can take anything she says seriously.”

Ayer: “Well, have at it then.”

Fink: “Catch ya on the way back.”

So, what follows isn't all that pleasant to tell. Fink moves toward The Moose all careful at first. When there was no sign that The Moose had noticed him, he just sprinted on through to the other side. And then Fink did a little happy jig and raised a sort of mocking thumbs up in Ayer's direction.

But, well you see, when Judith told Fink that if he didn't "wait for the nod" he would get "dumped on" that should really have been taken in its most crudely literal interpretation. Because just as Fink was finishing his jig, he was, and I mean this in all politeness, quite literally, *dumped on*.

And, like I said The Moose was pretty big, so this wasn't like as minor as accidentally stepping into something on the sidewalk. This was, and again I'm not trying to be gross, but this was Noah without an ark.

So, he wasn't actually hurt or anything, but Fink was freaking out like a child getting stung by a bee for the first time and screaming, not from actual pain, but mostly from the shock of it all. And so Fink, sickened to the point of madness by his own state, runs headlong into a nearby river. And, it's unfortunate, because he couldn't have known this, but the river was actually saltwater and chock full of lobster. And poor Fink emerges within seconds, screaming, and this time from actual pain, and he's like a Christmas tree with all these muddy looking ornaments hanging from his body. At every point, and I mean every point, where two lines met there was a lobster dangling from the poor guy.

And so in a desperate fury he tears the damn things off of him, and once they all skittered off, finally lays to rest on the trail behind The Moose, whose eyes are wide open and looking as though there's a smug smile somewhere behind its chin.

And Ayer, once he got over the initial shock of a guy getting, I guess maybe Nickelodeon-style *slimed* might be a good way of putting it, is laughing, not in a polite English chuckle sort of way, but that actually-painful, hysterical laughter that reaches deep, beyond the ribs, and into the soul and maybe changes you a bit.

Then, Ayer gets *the nod* and strolls on through to join Fink, who's still laying there on the ground.

Ayer: "Looks like you've got your adventure story for NatGeo already arranged."

Fink: "That's not even remotely funny."

Ayer: "I'm sure it will be to your avid readers."

Fink: "..."

Ayer: "Sorry. A hand?"

But then someone yells, "TIMBERRRRR!"

Fink, who's looking skyward and can see what's coming, and who also has that cat brand of reflexes, rolls out of the way in an instant. But Ayer, well he's not quite as quick, and like I said he wasn't really as fit as Fink. He goes to move, and looks like he's out of the danger zone, but then Ayer's arm gets caught on a branch, it's a little one, like a

freakishly long one that had grown straight out, at like a 90 degree angle from the middle of the tree's trunk, like it had just whipped it's arm around and slapped him. And so that hurt quite a bit obviously and he's screaming and hollering, pinned there, under what really is a pretty small branch, but it fell from a good height.

A couple of guys, woodsmen from the nearby camp, they come running over to assess the damage.

And then one, I think it was Stan Stevenson, says, "You're a lucky son of a bitch. That could've squashed you flat as a flapjack. "

And the other, I don't know who it was, helped him get out from under the branch and offers him a shoulder. And then Stan takes a look at Fink, who, as you can imagine, is a terrible sight too.

And he says, "Come along with us, we'll get you both fixed up."

So they walk down the trail to the lumber camp, where there's a cabin and a big fire already aflame. And well, it turns out, Ayer's arm was broken, so they made him a splint and put it in a sling. And Ayer was giving them all these directions about how to secure the arm correctly, except he wasn't that kind of doctor, and the men just sort of chuckled.

Except when they walked by Fink, then no one was chuckling. The smell of him was no laughing matter. You could hold your breath when you walked by and still the stink of it got in through your pores. And there were flies buzzing all around him and mosquitoes too. And he just sat there alone on a stump, like the one kid without a partner at a dance, and they all kept a good distance from him. Until one kind soul approached him with a bit of smudge—that's pine tar—to help with the flies. They didn't have much in the way of a shower at the cabin, but he could at least spread some smudge on his skin for the time. Helped a bit with the smell too.

Once Ayer was all fixed up it was near the noontime meal and all the men were coming in from the woods—about twenty or so worked in that section. And big cast iron pots filled with stew were waiting for them. Ayer and Fink got a couple of weird looks, but no one was gonna ask questions before they got their grub. Woodsmen have one track minds around mealtimes.

Once the men had a few bites in them things started opening up to grunts, and then a few words, and towards the bottom of their bowls some full sentences.

And so Stan asks Ayer (Fink, by the way is still sitting on a stump all on his own, swatting at flies between spoonfuls of stew), "What brings you all the way out here? Don't seem like you knew what you were getting into." (And by that he meant that even with what looked to be a durable day pack on his shoulders,

Ayer's fancy shoes and lamb's wool cardigan maybe weren't quite right for a journey in the woods.)

And Ayer, who in fact did hear the slight in the man's tone, says, "I'm here conducting research. Looking after a recluse known as Big Booted Bean. Have you come across him at all?"

Stan: "Hm. Bean you say? No, can't say I have. But then again no one has.

Always thought it was an old wives tale."

Ayer (scribbling away on a notebook): "Do you know where I might find him if he does exist?"

Stan: "Well, I'd guess somewhere in the woods north of here. That's where all those guys used to be before the Tract pushed them out. The North Wood we call it."

Ayer: "How might I get there? I didn't see it on the map"

Stan: "Probably because it's not well marked for tourists. Easy to get turned around in. I wouldn't recommend it. But if you're bent on it, head down that trail that cuts through here. It'll open up onto some cleared land. There's a few family farms over that way. They'll get your friend there a hot shower and tell you how to get to the northern border of the Tract."

Ayer: "Could you tell me a bit more about that—the Tract? I'm unfamiliar with it. There's only a few articles written on the matter."

Stan: "The history of this place? Well, it's not a story I like to tell."

So Stan fills Ayer in on why the Tract ever existed at all.

It all started as a preservation project. The Tract—which is what we call it by the way, it's Vacationland to the higher-ups—anyway, the Tract was meant to be a protected area, way up in a northern corner of the United States, sometime after they'd given up on managing urban sprawl. The point of it all, the rhetoric really, was all over the newspapers. Headlines like "Living History for Posterity" "Haven for American Redemption," etc. The idea was that it was gonna be like a Plymouth Plantation, but more *authentic*, right, because it was not *staged* but actually *lived* daily. They were combating a nationalistic problem that seemed to take root after the revolutionary generation died out, and their children and so on only got hand-me-down knowledge of the Founding Fathers from glossy textbook pages.

They were gonna stick us all up there so the rest of the country could keep on developing, full steam ahead, and let the exhaust pipes blow and blow on layers of asphalt and concrete. "Vacationland" was that one *redeeming* element. It was supposed to function like a mnemonic tool, a vehicle to recall origins. And so the idea was this—that no matter what, no matter how many times we paved the country over, sea to shining sea, we would never forget the roots that once dug deep.

I don't know if you've ever given much thought to this, but in America we're kind of funny about memory. We're self-conscious about not having much to remember, like it's a reflection on our depth—time-depth—on the whole. But the sad part is, and this is really where there's a paradox, because the sad part is that we are almost, on the whole,

always suffering from memory loss. We just can't seem to remember important things. *Ever*. So we never get deep. We're always pulling up saplings before they've really dug into the soil just yet.

And so, no one knew it, because they kept it a secret for about a century, but they'd been matriculating people into this bit of land north of Greenville. Anyone who wasn't too excited about recent developments—new game laws, grocery stores filled with industrial ag tomatoes and processed marshmallow Fluff, large stretches of highway, out-of-staters building ridiculous-looking homes next door—well, they'd been inviting them on the sly to move up north. Gave them a free tract of land in the backwoods, if they just signed this document to keep it a secret. And up there they could do as they always had and so there were all types in those woods, little old pioneers, Downeast painters, snow-shoeing champions, a couple black sheep from the Rockefeller family, and flannel-clad lumbermen.

And then one day, there were cement trucks waiting at the border. Idling by “The Way Life Should Be” sign that used to welcome you into the state, the sign that was supposed to signal some sort of transition, that you maybe wouldn't have felt until you saw it, and then you looked at the pine trees by the side of the road a little bit differently. Like their roots dug deeper.

Well, so the cement trucks were waiting and anyone who didn't like it could move to the Tract. But, you see, for all this time the land was really public land—it had never been

privately owned by anyone (even though the homesteaders thought they'd basically earned the land at this point according to old laws that everyone understood except elite capitalists) and so the government could do what they wanted with it. And their plan was to make it into a park and so we all got new stage names—named after trees mostly (you can see the symbolic significance), and soon we were using our stage names so often that we forgot they were for the stage. And now most of us folks have these tree last names that sound kind of funny to mainstream urban Americans. But we continued our way of life for a time on the land and tourists came year after year, until I guess the novelty of it was lost and the park fell into disuse and was more of a drain economically and so it dispersed. But they never did get to developing up there, not yet at least. Those are wild woods. Resistant to that sort of thing. It's in the sap, I tell you. Life that runs through there, in an ancient language, that translates roughly to saying, *this ground wasn't prepared for you*.

Soon, it was time for Fink and Ayer to be off—they'd just sort of become a pair at this point (disabled as they both were). They got directions from Stan and off they went down the trail. Ayer trying to keep a couple paces ahead of Fink's smell, though having trouble balance-wise on the rocky footing with his arm in a sling.

Fink: "So, the hermit, how'd you hear about him in your neck of the world?"

Ayer: "Well, my work is currently interested in eremitics, you know hermitology, the study of hermits as they manifest in the physical and imaginative topographies of human society; It's an obscure subfield of already-obscure contemporary studies

in Ethno-Eccentrics. I found this particular subject while researching for my dissertation on ‘Ornamental Hermits: Employed Garden Pets of the Melancholically-Inclined English Nobility.’ If you’re at all interested, Joseph Campbell wrote a wonderful architectural analysis of their historical relationship to the common garden gnome a few years back.”

Fink: “Gnomes you say? I’ll look into it.”

Ayer: “I’d be curious to know if this Vacationland fellow is at all gnomic—in the dual sense of the term—self-evident and fundamental to the region, while also characteristically gnome-like.”

Fink: “Yeah. Duality. Very apropos.”

Ayer: “Yeah...”

Fink had a habit of inserting French-sounding words (he didn’t know if they were French) into conversations that went over his head. He also liked the word, “maudlin.”

Ayer: “And you? What brings you to a hermit’s abode?”

Fink: “Well, I have my ear close to the ground for all the most out-there authentic stuff. Land-diving with actual Vanuatu natives, curling up next to hibernating bears, and going on safaris, but treating them more as petting zoos. So this guy I’m after up here in the woods, I heard about through the grapevine, an underground little-known network—well, on Reddit, but like the Reddit backwaters that few people know how to search for—a thread about ‘A real authentic wild man in the most authentic part of the country.’ No one had seen the guy up close or could get the

guy's story. A real bigfoot case, you know. But since I'm basically the only person to have ever swum with the Loch Ness Monster or to have actually netted the giant squid, getting an interview with this guy will be no problem. My editor's stoked."

Ayer: "That most certainly does *sound* promising."

Fink: "Plus, I feel a kind of pull toward this guy already. We're so similar in many ways. I mean, I'm all about lawlessness and living by your wits and this hermit is out there in some of the wildest country north of Texas (the national "Pavement Project" is a real bummer for untamed guys like me), probably poaching bear and dodging the IRS."

Ayer: "I suppose he could be."

Fink: "I'm gonna be the guy to break the story, bring it to the people. Then guys like you can come in later and analyze the shit out of it—which is, well, important too."

Ayer: "Uh huh." (mumbling from up ahead of Fink) "Sure, the only difference being your material hits the recycling bin the next morning."

Fink: "Hm?"

Ayer: "I see the clearing up ahead."

The path opened out into rolling fields. Around where I used to live on Rumphius Lane. Blueberry farms and sheep grazing for miles and lupine-lined footpaths. In the distance you could see a lighthouse and the Rockefellers mansion up on a big hill.

But it was so quiet you could hear a pine needle drop. There was no one around because there was a barn raising that day, which is a whole community production that ends in a booze-centric feast. Used to be a real tourist attraction. The equivalent of a luau in a Polynesian resort. Spectators turned participant revelers. But this wasn't at all visible from where they were standing, because it was downhill on the east side of the settlement, and the fiddling, which always accompanies a raising, was faint on the air. Easily mistaken for soft forest sounds. And so they were at a loss at what to do.

Until one of those old Model-T's drove by. The only car on the Tract actually. Belonged to the Rockefeller family. Fink waved the car down and jogged over to talk to its driver, asking for directions to a shower, or at the very least a bar of soap for sale. And the back window rolled down and a man with a wide, white-as-snow mustache curled up at the ends, and a bowler hat, spitting image of John D., the late oil tycoon himself, I heard, poked his head out, and took a look at the pair of them, sniffed at the air around Fink and pulled out a kerchief from his pocket, shielding his nose.

Rockefeller: "Do you boys need a hand with something?"

Fink: "A hot shower and a cold beer, if you have it."

Ayer: "I just require directions to the North Wood."

Rockefeller: "The Moose give you some trouble there?"

Fink: "A bit. And a short run in with some nasty critters. Nothing serious."

Ayer: "Just directions, would be fine, thank you."

Rockefeller: “Well, the pair of you look like you’re in pretty bad shape and I’m the stand-in proprietor around here. If you sit downwind in the bed, I can give you a lift up to the cottage. We’ll fix you up good as new.”

Ayer: “That’s very kind of you, sir. We’d be grateful for the assistance.”

Fink (in a British-affected accent): “Yes, thank ye kindly.”

The Rockefellers’ place was a cottage, but only in the most modest sense of the term, meaning, it was actually just a massive, red-shingled estate, all turrets and gables, after a Tudor style. A gem, or blight on the landscape, depending on your point of view. There were painters all over up there, easels set up, humming about the “happy little [pine] trees,” on their canvases.

Fink was directed to a bath, while Ayer prodded the old Rockefeller for some hermit-related information.

Rockefeller: “The hermit? Sure, I’ve heard of him. But I doubt he’s still around. I’ve been hearing about him since I was a young boy. And even then he was old.”

Ayer: “Did any of the stories mention where he lived?”

Rockefeller: “Not that I can remember. How’s your arm?”

Ayer: “Oh fine, thanks.”

Rockefeller: “Good—Look, you two seem to be in pretty bad shape. I can give you a ride out of the park if you’d like. Doesn’t make much sense to stick around, miserable as you are.”

Ayer: “That’s kind of you, but I’d like to try to call on the hermit first.”

Rockefeller: “Suit yourself. I just wouldn’t count on finding him or coming out alive for that matter.”

Rockefeller gave Ayer a tour of the place and the gardens, which, Ayer remarked, had an aesthetically-pleasing structural shape and exceptionally tasteful floral contents.

Fink: (fresh from the shower, calling from a balcony) “Hey Rocky, got any good wine around here? I’m itching for a midday drink.”

When the Rockefeller had gone into the house to fetch a bottle Ayer says to Fink, “What are you doing?”

Fink: “Couple of drinks and they start singing. Old journalistic trick.”

Ayer: “Our host doesn’t seem to know much in the way of helping us.”

Fink: “Trust me. He knows something. This is an insular community—secretive by nature. I have a lot of practice with this stuff.”

Ayer: “Then it’s waste of time *and* immoral.”

Ayer, who declined to join the afternoon fiesta, was pointed toward the estate’s lighthouse (which, in all honesty, didn’t have much a function, being a hundred miles or so from any serious body of water), for the view it afforded.

When he'd climbed its dark wooden steps to the top, he saw the world much as it appeared on the map. The topography of a rustic amusement park. To the south, rolling hills and patches of wooded areas and The Moose's antlers, rivers carving out space around lumbering operations, mills, a small colonial settlement, ship-builders who didn't exactly have a place to put their handiwork, and a barn in-the-works missing two sides. To the North, the land barely seemed to be in use. There was a stretch of tundra, which to Ayer seemed seasonally impossible, but to any Tract resident is actually an eco-logical natural phenomenon (a topic we can discuss another time). Beyond that was a dense, uninviting, expanse of wildwood. What was once the North Wood.

To Ayer's eye, there was something odd about it. It's difficult to describe. Somewhere in there was a point toward which everything moved. Like a gravitational center, a nucleus, that was not actually geographically centrally located, but a vortex pulling from the side. The trees were all inclined in one direction, as if being pulled to this single point, like the metallic filings in a Woolly Willy game drawn along by a massively powerful magnetic wand.

And so Ayer, in all his educated wisdom, guessed that there was something going on over there, something possibly, and hopefully most likely, causally linked to Big Booted Bean. Using his compass, he sketched out a rough map for himself on the back of the now unprofessionally folded map, drawing as precisely as possible the relative distances between features in the landscape—hills, ponds, etc.

(Spatially, this wasn't actually a huge area—maybe five miles laterally and three miles longitudinally. The Tract being in fact, fairly geographically small, but in some places, incredibly difficult to travel—especially because what looks simple from above, is actually much more complex and disorienting when you're in the thick of it—a fact which people from away didn't always quite grasp.)

So, Ayer returned to the cottage back patio, where he'd left Fink and the old Rockefeller day drinking, all excited—in that intellectual sort of way common to academics, as if just having taken an espresso shot to the brain, noticeably shaking from the jolt to the nodes, eager for kinetic release on an unsuspecting lay person—to share his find.

To his great irritation, Ayer found Fink and the Rockefeller in a wine-induced stupor, napping on the expensive lawn furniture.

And so, in his posh-heavy accent, Fink said, *fuck it*. And struck out on his own.

At the time, this seemed like a good idea. He'd brought with him a pack with a full water bottle, plenty of notebook paper, a compass, a Cliff bar, and a swiss army knife he'd never so much as opened. He was well-equipped, he felt, except in the footwear department, as he soon realized when he came to the stretch of tundra. Ayer's feet were wet and cold with snow that packed into his wingtips with each step. He'd have given anything for a pair of snowshoes.

When he reached the tree line, where the snow seemed to be thinning, he thought he was past the worst of it. Until a cross country skier came around the corner of the trails and clipped him on his bad arm, knocking him flat on his ass, now as soaked as his feet, and didn't even look back. Seconds later another one popped out of the trail, intent on the back of the person in front of them, and then another just as intensely focused. Upon recognizing the competitive spirit in their speed and indifference to him, Ayer moved out of the way, waiting for the pack of aggressive skiers to clear.

Again, he thought he'd seen the worst of it. But Ayer, by birth an urbanite Londoner, didn't recognize the bear prints—small and big ones running parallel to each other—that crisscrossed the trails every fifty yards or so. He was in bear country, he was soon to find out.

The bear seemed to come out of nowhere, and they're surprisingly quick in the woods. It charged poor Ayer, because, I'd assume, he'd crossed the baby at some point and the mother got pissed. It was a black bear and those fellas aren't that big, but that doesn't mean it's not terrifying to have a mammal with a large set of claws and teeth after you.

Ayer managed somehow, considering his body weight, impractical footwear, and infirmed arm, to climb up a tree, away from the bear, who was growling and clawing at the trunk, while the baby just sort of yelped in support behind it. And it wasn't looking too good because the bear didn't look like it was gonna back down anytime soon. Ayer tried to shoo it away by kicking out at the bear sort of pathetically with his foot, but the

bear caught him on his toes with its paws and teeth and started wrestling with it. And so Ayer had to slip his foot out before the bear dragged him out of that tree completely, or worse, made off with his toes in its teeth.

Losing that wingtip shoe was the absolute last straw for Ayer. The pudgy-cheeked chickadee sitting up on his tree branch was full on mourning (sobbing) over his now-bare, still soaking wet, sock-covered foot. And the bear was gnawing on the shoe like a dog on a bone and all hope really did seem lost in those wild American woods.

But then Ayer heard shotgun fires from somewhere down the trail. And somehow, god knows how, it was Fink coming out of the woods, smoking a fat rolled cigar, shooting blindly, basically at random, down Ayer's way, which in retrospect was probably more dangerous for Ayer than the bear. But it looked cool—like if you put Hunter Thompson in an *Indiana Jones* action scene. Fink's hollering at the bear, and puffing on the cigar hanging off the corner of his mouth, firing shots like a drunk cowboy. And the bear finally ran off with its tail between its legs, whimpering a little, and got the heck out of there with its cub in tow.

Fink: "So you ditch me while I'm taking a cat nap?"

Ayer (out of breath): "Cheers, Fink. Seriously thought I was in deep shit for a minute there."

Fink: "Better be fucking grateful. I just saved your scholar ass from certain death."

It turns out, Fink had woken up at the Rockefellers about an hour after Ayer left, nicked an antique gun off the wall of a rec room and a smoke from a cigar box in the cottage while the Rockefeller was still snoozing in a supine position, and had followed Ayer's wingtip tracks all the way into the woods. (The Rockefellers, by the way, never did get that gun back, which apparently was John D.'s from way back when and, word is, the loss didn't help much with their already-estranged familial status).

The tricky thing about hermits, as Ayer and Fink found out, is that they cover up their footsteps—there are no actual prints to follow—and so even a comprehensive map of the area is somewhat useless. Ayer had the right idea concerning a roughly northward direction, but they really only had trappers' footpaths to travel—and the trappers themselves were of no help, because although they were witnesses to Fink and Ayer bumbling about in the woods, they were a bit queer in the head from all the weeks out there on their own, so they mostly just scurried around, unnoticed, quick and quiet as rabbits, when people came through (which was rare and partially why they were so spooked when it happened).

And then at a certain point the map became useless. When Ayer and Fink thought they were getting closer to the nucleus, it seemed to move on them. They could feel, or perhaps it was paranoia, the trees shifting, rearranging, deliberately disorienting.

And Fink, who's now incredibly frustrated and jumpy says, "Hand the map over."

And Ayer says, "I'm following it the best that I can."

Fink: “Just let me have a look.”

Ayer, who was walking in front of Fink on the narrow trail, sighed heavily and passed the map over his shoulder with a lazy flick of the wrist.

But he didn't know what was happening back there until he caught a whiff of something burning and a fleck of ash landed on his nose. Ayer turned around to find the map, that absurdly large map, was now about the size of a tissue between Fink's fingers. And Fink was watching it burn with a strange look of fascination and thrill, which most people have if they focus on a flame for any length of time.

Ayer: “What the fuck are you doing?” (Ayer when he's angry, by the way, at times forgets he possesses an impressive catalogue of language, and sometimes slips in and out of a coarser cockney dialect).

Fink: “We have to be lost, completely lost. I didn't want to, but we don't have a choice.”

Ayer: “What kind of logic is that? How the fuck are we supposed to get out of here now?”

Fink: “Makes perfect sense.”

Ayer: “Why don't you fucking explain it to me, then.”

Fink: “Old Rocky told me—at least just the stories he's heard. All the local stuff they keep to themselves out of some sense of civil protest. Anyway, they don't

know this for sure, but since no one's ever found a body or bone remains in the woods, they don't think anyone's actually died out here."

Ayer: "Then what happens to them?"

Fink: "Sometimes it takes hours. Sometimes it takes days, depending on how far from the source they are. But people think they somehow find their way to the hermit's home and he brings them back safe to civilization. It's never been proven, because lost hikers are never seen again, but they think it has to do with animal magnetism, mesmerism—a kind of natural hypnosis."

Ayer: "That's ridiculous. Mesmerism is a pseudoscience. All the medical literature says so." (Again, not that kind of doctor.)

Fink: "But from how Rocky explained it, there's something there. It's like Bean is tapped into the current of all living things here. Think about it. He probably approached the frontier—a place with no map—and walked in basically blind. He felt his way into the wild and then found a home, a resting place in a land that should otherwise reject him. How else could he do it on *ground that's not prepared for us*[that's a local saying]? He has to in some sense be a part of the landscape—no-place, no-man, his identity dispersed throughout the wood, indistinguishable from it. That's why he's invisible. He's not somewhere. He's everywhere."

This was all very difficult for Ayer, a man accustomed to the careful sculpture of an English garden, and the tidy economical exchange that kept ornamental English hermits living in a hut and growing out their beards in those sculpted gardens (i.e. hermits with a definite spatial place and function), to understand.

Fink: “It shouldn’t be long now. We’re close to the source.”

The hermit’s home was nothing like they imagined it. Big Booted Bean lived in a giant brown leather Bean boot, with all manner of animals—fox, otter, birds—nested in the leather tongue and along its shoelaces. The boot was lined with bear skin and easily the size of a small cabin. There was a handcrafted wooden ladder resting on its side, which one could only guess, the hermit used to climb in and out of his abode. And around the perimeter of the dwelling was a ring of beaver dams, chest-high, barricading the enclosure, and beavers were busy at work maintaining it for their master.

Climbing the thick, brushwood dams uneasily, and disturbing a number of furry mammals in the process, Fink and Ayer approached the boot with some apprehension. Fink shyly struck its soft leather.

And they heard a strange sort of knocking about inside and within seconds the hermit, Big Booted Bean himself, emerged with a rifle at his shoulder, fur-clad, white locks billowing across a set of eyes, peering suspiciously down on their stiff forms.

Bean: “Lost are yuh?”

Fink (clearing his throat): “Hello Mr. Bean, how are you this fine day?”

Ayer: “Good afternoon, sir.”

Bean: “What in god’s name...?”

Fink: "I'm Arnold Fink and my companion here is Bernard Ayer. We came to ask you a few questions."

Ayer: "We have a polite interest in your story Mr. Bean. We'd be grateful for just a few moments of your time."

Bean: "My story? What in the heck do yuh want my story for?"

Ayer: "Simple scholarship. Pure scientific interest."

Fink: "What my friend here means, because we're not here to treat you like a lab animal of course, is that we thought you might have something important to share, you know, with curious folks back home."

Bean: "To share? I don't share."

Aye: "Well, perhaps then, just a quick word on something you might have learned in your time out here?"

Bean obviously looked none too pleased.

Bean: "You're a queer pair, the two of yuh. And I don't like you here one bit. What a dirty trick you sorry folks pulled to get here. I have nothin' to tell yuh."

Ayer: "Please sir, we're not here to intrude."

Bean: "Not here to intrude? HA. I've heard it all. I s'pose you want to know why I left your world? Or maybe the secret, the key to the wild? Have me take a stab at the Meaning of Life?"

Ayer and Fink were nodding vigorously.

Bean: “My secret is this: Quit the tobacco, get some exercise and make the most of it.”

And without another word, Bean slipped back down into the leathery depths of his boot-home.

And then a great shudder went through the land, like an earthquake. The ground rocked, the trees shook, and the animals ran for cover. The forest unwound and crawled away, and then, in an instant, the hermit and his boot were gone. All that was left was a footprint—a massive basin-of-a boot print. And then that was gone too. Followed by darkness, a deep, hollow-feeling lack, like in the emptied pupils of a dead thing. And when it lifted, Fink and Ayer found themselves standing on the gravel road by the Dysart’s truck stop, an empty bottle of Moxie rolling around at their feet (one missing its shoe), doing donuts in the wind.

Interviewer: And that was it?

H.C.: Well, that’s how I heard it anyway.

I wasn't asked to leave, but I knew when it was time. Though I'd tried to fill the air back up, the silence was final—as heavy a quiet as I've ever known. I'd intruded on the hermit's isolation for too long. It was time to turn back.

It's a weird feeling now that I'm here on the other side of the woods where the ground is all paved. It's not that I found enlightenment or anything. It wasn't that kind of journey. It's more that the surface under my feet feels too smooth now, too passive. I don't trust it like I did before.

There's a good chance this feeling will go away soon. I can already feel the memories fading. The forest, too, has probably already forgotten me, reclaimed itself, tucked back away all of its secrets. But there's no denying I was once there—interacting with a legendary mind. And I suspect, even if it gets buried deep in the recesses of my mind—a distant memory of a forgotten dream—the imprint it left behind, the beginnings of a new trail, will remain.

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